

Sacrifice by ElioNova

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Genre: Dead by Daylight - Freeform, M/M, Multi

Language: English

Characters: Danny "Jed Olsen" Johnson | The Ghost Face, David King (Dead by Daylight), Dwight Fairfield, Elodie Rakoto, Felix Richter, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Vigo (Dead by Daylight), Yui Kimura, Zarina Kassir

Relationships: Danny "Jed Olsen" Johnson | The Ghost Face/Felix Richter, Steve Harrington/Felix Richter

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Summary:

Felix Richter doesn't know why he was taken by the Entity, or whether he can escape living in its Hell, but he isn't ready to give up hope. Steve Harrington, another captive of the fog, is one of the few things Felix has to cling to to keep him sane. With Steve and his friends, Felix can almost endure the pain and death of the horrific Trials they are forced to undergo together. But when Felix faces a dark figure with an uncanny mask, he is faced with a new kind of torture, one which threatens to put him over the edge...

1. Chapter 1

Felix Richter awoke groggily by the campfire, a searing pain filling his head as the memories of his last Trial were stripped from his mind. His hand moved of its own accord to his chest as a memory of the awful, stabbing pain he'd felt lingered longer than the rest. The spidery leg of that *thing*, the "Entity" as the journals they'd found called it, had pierced his chest as he hung screaming on the hook, and taken his dead body—or was it his soul?—somewhere *else*. He wondered where, and why, as he always did when he first woke up.

What was the point of it all? Why did this thing want them to suffer? Why did it want them to have the hope of escape? Was this punishment?

For his part, Felix was still determined to find a way out of this place. He didn't want his child to grow up without a father, and spend their life wondering why their father had disappeared without a trace, as Felix had. Perhaps they would feel nothing for Felix, the father they'd never known; the thought pained him, but he knew that would be better. A voice at the back of his mind whispered that, if his child did go on a quest to find answers, it might bring them to this same Hell, and above all that could not be allowed to happen. He blocked the voice out as best he could and sat up.

Three other people were already awake, talking in somber voices. One had their back turned to him; he couldn't see her face. Two of them he'd met in this place before, and though the memory of their ordeals together was taken from them each time, he sensed that they'd endured the Hell of the Trial together many times before. How long had it been since the ghost of his father had led him here? Weeks? Months? Years? He had no reference for the passage of time.

Felix had decided that the specter he'd seen on Dyer Island hadn't been his father at all, but an enticing illusion made by the Entity: a trap and nothing more. None of the other survivors he'd met had mentioned seeing him here; Felix hoped he was somewhere else, at peace in death and not condemned as Felix now was. When the Entity allowed him to dream, it sometimes filled his head with images of the Pariahs' parents in a vast darkness, screaming and

begging for death. He had told himself so many times that this wasn't real, that it was just the Entity toying with him, that he had begun to believe it. He had to, or he might hesitate if—*when*—he found a way out of this place.

"Are you okay, Felix?" Someone at the campfire called out to him. It was Steve, one of the Americans he'd met here. He sat with his arms wrapped around his legs, closer to the fire than the others.

"I'm fine," Felix said finally. It was a quotidian ritual they still clung to; all of them knew that they could never be 'fine' in a place like this. The banality of it was somehow comforting.

Felix moved closer to the fire and the three others gathered there. There were always three others—never more, and never fewer—at the campfire when he awoke. He didn't know if he'd met everyone condemned to this Hell with him, or even if they were real people or mere constructions of the Entity designed to give him hope. He chose to believe they were real, inasmuch as anything was in this place. Dwight, another American, muttered a quiet "hello" to him but stared listlessly into the fire.

He was taken aback when he realized he recognized the third person from the real world; Élodie, who had once been one of his closest friends, was weeping silently into her hands. The shadow of a nasty bruise on her head peeked out from behind them. He intuited that this place was completely new to her, and the others had just informed her where she had, somehow, found herself.

"Élodie?" he said quietly. She looked up at the sound of his voice, and to his surprise immediately wrapped him in a hug. He knew what she was feeling all too well: unmoored, lost, with nothing to cling to from the real world. The distance that had grown between them over the years faded instantly in that moment.

"You were right all along," Felix said simply, finding he was choking on the words. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"It doesn't matter now," she said. There was no malice in her voice, though they'd fought over her ideas before. At the time, they had been so hard to believe; or perhaps, Felix hadn't wanted to believe

them.

“You’re the first person I’ve seen here that I knew from the real world,” Felix said; he didn’t tell her that sometimes the Entity sent him dreams of the other Pariah as well, whispering that one day they, too, would be lost forever to this place. He hadn’t believed it then, but seeing Élodie now... “Do you know how long I’ve been missing?” Felix couldn’t help but ask, afraid of the answer.

She hesitated. “The other Pariahs reached out to me three years ago, using our old channels, asking if I knew anything about what might have happened to you on Dyer Island. Your disappearance opened their minds somewhat to my ideas. I was still on the hunt for answers when I found my way to this place.” She smiled without warmth. “I suppose now I shall have them.”

“T-three years?” Felix gasped, his pulse racing. Had he been here that long? Been tortured that many times? His child would be 2 years old now. He could hardly breathe, and stumbled back from Élodie. Steve stood up and put an understanding hand on his shoulder to steady him. Dwight still hardly moved; in his eyes he saw empathy, but somehow also the understanding that Dwight had been here much longer than Felix had.

Felix sat down hard on a log, Steve’s steady hand still on his shoulder. The other man was younger, and this place had broken him as much as it had Felix, but it hadn’t robbed him yet of his good heart and his desire to protect others. Élodie and Steve sat down next to him, and Felix took a calming breath.

“We’re going to find a way out of here,” he said at last. Élodie nodded resolutely, but then she had not yet faced the Trial. Steve said nothing, but Felix could see in the way his eyes darkened that he was losing hope that that was true. Felix wanted to say something to rekindle it, to repay the favor, but he never got the chance; the fog was already rolling in on them from all sides, as it always did.

“What’s happening?” Élodie asked, fear evident in her voice. Steve just closed his eyes. Dwight stood up, addressing them properly for the first time since Felix had awoken.

“The Trial’s starting,” he said as the fog, thicker than any Felix had ever seen on Earth, quickly enveloped them. “I’m sorry, Élodie.”

2. Chapter 2

When the fog finally dissipated, Felix was alone. Somehow, he recognized this place, though the Entity had allowed no conscious memory of it to stay in his mind. It resembled a forest, a great estate with a foundry at its heart. Its architecture, the first thing Felix always noticed, was ever-so-slightly wrong, like a poor copy of a real-world structure.

Its design in places made no sense, but he had no time to think about that. He had to find one of those strange devices the Entity insisted they labor over, to at once distract them and force them to congregate in areas where one of its Corrupted Ones would eventually find them. He crept forward, a flashing light in the distance announcing the presence of one of these “generators”. He took care to give a wide berth to a crow sitting on a rock; their eyes betrayed a fierce intelligence and he had become convinced they were servants of the Entity.

He barely had time to open the side panel on the generator when he heard a high-pitched scream in the distance; the scream was Élodie’s. He still wasn’t sure how, but somehow in this place he could *see* her aura, and he could tell she was already on the ground. He tried to ignore it, and work on his generator. He’d never known how to fix a generator in the real world, but this machine was different. Somehow he simply *knew* what to do, as though the Entity had placed the knowledge in his brain.

Shortly afterward he heard her scream again as the killer placed her on one of the infernal hooks. He tried not to picture his friend’s shoulder being pierced through with it, but he couldn’t block out her cries of anguish as she hung there. He wondered if he should go to help her, and started to leave his generator when he saw someone else—Dwight or Steve—had been closer and had already brought her down. He sighed in relief, and had just gotten the generator working again when he heard a *click* and a rustle of fabric nearby and turned away from the panel to see a man in a red mask and black-and-red robes staring at him through the trees. He took off at a sprint toward the foundry, and as he did he felt his heartbeat start racing in terror;

he glanced behind him as he ran and saw the masked man—the Ghostface, he'd heard another survivor call him once—stalking his movements. He had never seen this killer before, he was sure, but he had learned through hard experience his best chance was to run as fast as he could.

He made it to the foundry and leapt through a hole in the wall, but Ghostface was too close; he slashed viciously with his knife, tearing through Felix's vest and shirt and sinking a cruel blade deeply into the skin of his back. Felix cried out, and made his way through the building, leaving a trail of blood behind him; he didn't make it far. Ghostface grabbed his ankle as he ran up the stairs and Felix fell, painfully smashing his arm into the cold metal in a vain attempt to protect his head. The masked man, with incredible strength, pulled Felix back onto the cold concrete and flipped him onto his back. With his other hand, he pinned both of Felix's wrists above his head and used the other to slip his hunting knife twice between Felix's ribs.

Felix screamed as waves of pain flooded his body, but he knew the other man was just playing with him. The wounds were non-fatal, and he could tell Ghostface liked how much Felix was struggling in his grasp. For a moment Ghostface set the knife down and his hand simply explored his body. Felix heard a generator fire up in the distance, and quickly afterward a second, but Ghostface was unfazed. He was too busy playing with his food. Felix tried to get the leverage to kick him, but his masked attacker had wrapped his legs around Felix's waist, pinning Felix helplessly underneath him. He reeked of old leather and an odd scent his nose belatedly recognized as dried blood.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Felix grunted as Ghostface’s hand strayed farther and farther down his body. The other man said nothing, but his hand slipped into Felix’s pants, and Felix could only groan as Ghostface’s hand grazed his cock, and then his freezing fingers squeezed his balls with such force Felix thought they would burst. He screamed, louder this time, and Ghostface’s hand shot with lightning speed up to his mouth to shut him up. Felix heard a tremulous sigh through the mask at the muffled sounds of Felix’s anguish.

Felix felt tears spilling from his eyes, and the other man greedily

wiped them up and brought them under his mask. He caught a glimpse of Ghostface licking Felix's tears from his fingers before he returned the mask to its proper position.

"Get the fuck off me," Felix managed now that his mouth was free. Ghostface cocked his head, as if to say, "Why would I want to do that?" and without warning the blade was crossing Felix's chest again, slashing long, shallow cuts into his abdomen, tearing the skin to shreds. Felix closed his eyes as he cried out once more, picturing his parents' home in Coburg and pretending he was there, in the library with his father, until this torture ended.

Ghostface didn't like that. He stabbed Felix again, more deeply this time, and forced his victim's eyes open with cold fingers so Felix would have to watch.

"Please, just hook me, I just wa—" Ghostface stuck his fingers in Felix's mouth now, probing it as deeply as he could. Felix's instinct was to bite down, but he knew it would earn him another wound from the knife, so he fought the urge and let it happen. That seemed to please Ghostface, and to Felix's horror he felt a growing hardness on his navel where his attacker's groin rested.

Before his mind could get to the point of thinking about what Ghostface might want from him, Steve came out of nowhere, pushing Ghostface roughly off of Felix's chest. Part of him knew this only worked because it caught even Ghostface by surprise; he could have easily overpowered the young American otherwise. Steve pulled Felix to his feet and they sprinted as fast as they could out of the building before Ghostface could recover. As they ran, Felix was sure he heard Ghostface sigh contentedly, as if he was happy his prey wasn't making it easy for him.

"This way!" Steve called out to him. Felix's breathing was shallow and rapid, and he could feel himself losing blood; by the time they were sure Ghostface wasn't following Steve was supporting him completely on one arm. By some small stroke of fortune Steve had found a medkit and did his best to stitch up and disinfect the stab wounds on Felix's chest and back. Any internal damage Felix would have to hope was shallow enough to endure until they could finish the generators.

“Thank you,” Felix said as Steve applied a bandage. “I don’t think he just wanted to kill me. I thought he was going t-to—”

“I know,” Steve said as Felix trailed off. “I should have done something sooner. I saw it happening through the window but I... I couldn’t move.”

“You saved me. Maybe it’s not even the first time; the Entity won’t even let us keep those memories.”

“You did the same for me once,” Steve said, and Felix could only raise a quizzical eyebrow. “I don’t know why I remember it, but I do. The gates were open; you could have run out if you wanted. I would’ve if I had been you, because we were cursed and couldn’t find the hex. But you didn’t. You came back to pull me off the hook, and you distracted the Demogorgon so I could escape.”

The ghost of a memory formed in his mind as Steve spoke; the immense pain as a vaguely humanoid creature’s face had opened like a perverse flower, and its rows and rows of razor-sharp teeth had torn into his face and crushed his skull, even as it deposited disgusting slug-like creatures in his mouth. He shuddered at the thought; he tried to pull himself up but he still felt weak, and as he collapsed he let out a slightly hysterical sob. How had his life sunk to this? Three years of this torture, and he hadn’t even known it. For the first time, a part of him wanted to simply die, *truly* die and not just find himself waking up at the campfire.

To his surprise, Steve wrapped him in his arms, and for a few moments they could ignore the horror around them.

That moment of comfort was broken roughly by Dwight’s nearby scream. Felix and Steve abruptly broke apart, crouching together behind a half-broken brick wall. As they watched, Dwight was picked up off the ground and hooked right next to them. He cried out again, his anguish piercing Felix’s heart with dread. He suddenly realized Steve was squeezing his hand as if to say, “We can get out of here,” and when he met his eyes he saw that fierce resolve. He let it infect him as well.

They hid as Ghostface passed; in the distance, Élodie had completed

their fourth generator, which distracted the masked man enough to tear him away from the area. Dwight writhed on the hook but Felix and Steve both knew it was almost impossible to wriggle free without killing yourself. If anything, it excited that *thing*, the Entity. Writhing only led to more pain, but it was hard not to struggle against the deep ache of having that terrible, infernal thing piercing your chest.

“I’ll free Dwight,” Felix said, finding his courage once more. “I’ll patch him up with your medkit. We’re so close now to getting out, Steve. If you can finish that generator over there, the four of us can all still get out.”

Steve nodded and passed him the medical supplies; they were running low but Felix knew how to make the most of them. He ran quickly to the hook, glancing beyond him frequently to make sure Ghostface wasn’t following. When he pulled Dwight down, the other man let out a cry of relief as the cold metal was pulled out from underneath his collarbone.

“Fuck!” Dwight said as the gaping wound filled with blood. Felix laid him down gently and did the best he could to close it. The desperation of the situation quickened his pace as he worked, and before long Dwight was strong enough to stand.

“Thank you,” Dwight gasped.

“We’ll never survive this if we don’t work together,” Felix said firmly.

“I found this,” Dwight said, pulling a strange key out of his pocket. It seemed to vibrate with energy. “If we can’t finish the generators, we’ll have another way out.” Felix nodded, but he hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“We have to get out of here,” Felix said, “He’ll be coming back here soon. Steve is working on the last generator over there and—” He was interrupted by the sound of Élodie screaming in the distance, and her cries were abruptly cut off with a disturbing gurgle. Dwight met Felix’s eyes; they both knew she was dead. Without a word, they ran to Steve’s generator. Steve said nothing as they approached; he was razor-focused on finishing it as soon as he could so they could escape. Felix and Dwight started to help, and within moments it was almost

working again. Dwight let out a sigh of relief. “I think we’re really gonna make it,” he said.

Then, without warning, a hand grabbed him by the hair, pulled his head back, and drew a knife quickly across his throat.

“Jesus!” Steve cried out, accidentally letting two wires connect in a shower of sparks. Felix tried to get up and run but Ghostface grabbed his head and smashed it painfully into the side of the generator. He collapsed and the world spun around him in a haze as Ghostface sprinted after Steve, who had run off.

Felix groaned; this was the end for him, he knew. He crawled agonizingly to Dwight; the other man’s hands were covering the deep line of red blossoming from his throat, and he looked at Felix with terror, pleading with his eyes to do something to help him... but there was nothing Felix could do. Felix clamped his hand over the terrible, warm wound and took Dwight’s hand in his, so he wouldn’t be alone as he died. He wished he could have done the same for Élodie.

“I’m so cold,” Dwight whispered, his words almost incomprehensible as they escaped his torn throat.

“You’re cold because you’re in a ski lodge high in the Alps,” Felix said, searching desperately for something to comfort his dying friend through the haze from his head wound. “I’m here. Can you see it? There’s a warm fire nearby. You’re surrounded by your friends. People who love you and believe in you. And, and—” Felix found himself choking on the words, but he realized Dwight was already gone. He screamed, not in pain, but in rage that his friend had to die, that it wouldn’t be the last time for him, or for any of them.

He grabbed the side of the generator to steady himself and stood up. The generator was almost completed, but with his head wound and the way the world was spinning it might as well have been completely destroyed. He felt sick as he took the key from Dwight’s pocket, but it was their only chance now. Steve’s only chance. He brought his fingers to his forehead and found warm blood flowing from it. *I’m not gonna make it out of here, but maybe Steve can.*

He staggered off in the direction he thought Steve had started running. He looked for signs: broken branches, muddy footprints, but the world was still spinning. He hardly made it 4 meters before his boot caught on a branch and he fell face first into the mud. He didn't have the strength to keep going; he felt fresh blood spilling once more into his vest from wounds that must have reopened. He lay there for a moment, but then he heard Steve cry out in pain and rage filled him.

With great effort, Felix pulled himself out of the mud and made slow, agonizing progress to the foundry which he thought was the source of Steve's scream. He pulled himself painfully through the same hole in the wall he'd vaulted when Ghostface first chased him, but this time he felt his boot land on hard metal rather than concrete. *The hatch!*

Felix pulled the key out of his pocket, and was ashamed that he considered leaving right then and there, ending this...until the next time. But then Steve cried out again, and he made his choice.

Felix rounded the corner, and he saw Steve in a heap on the floor. Ghostface had broken both of his ankles and was toying with him now, watching him crawl away slowly as he left a trail of blood from a vicious stab wound on his side and upper back. When Steve noticed Felix, he started making his way toward him, crying softly, dark red stains in his sweater revealing more stab wounds in his chest. Ghostface didn't move; he cocked his head quizzically as if wondering how Felix had made it all the way to the Foundry in the first place, as if he was losing his touch and should have smashed his head a little harder. Or maybe he simply wondered why Felix hadn't finished the generator and left while he toyed with Steve.

It broke Felix's heart to see his friend like this, but he only had one way to fight back. He feigned a stumble and dropped to one knee, using his fall as a cover to place the key in Steve's hand. If Ghostface knew the hatch was so close, they were both fucked, but it was the only chance they had now.

Felix pulled himself up, agonizingly slowly. "What you want is right in front of you," Felix said, ostensibly talking to Ghostface. "Just hook us and let this end." Steve kept crawling, moving faster now, realizing what Felix was trying to do for him. Ghostface had eyes

only for Felix now. Suddenly he moved with astonishing speed to close the distance between them and pushed Felix roughly against the central smelting furnace. Felix grabbed his attacker's arm to pry it off his chest but Ghostface was much stronger than he was, and within seconds Ghostface had turned him around and had pinned his arms behind his back. Seemingly out of nowhere, Ghostface produced coarse black rope that he used to tie Felix's hands impossibly tight. Felix let out a whimper as he felt the knife tear away the last vestiges of his vest and dress shirt.

Felix tried not to think about why Ghostface wasn't simply sacrificing himself to the Entity, as Ghostface produced more rope to tie his biceps to his sides and encircle his body. Ghostface pushed him roughly to the floor, and Felix instinctively tried to raise his hands to protect himself but was helplessly bound and hit the floor hard. Stars swirled in his eyes, but distantly he heard the distinctive sound of the hatch opening. Ghostface hissed in frustration and ran after Steve but it was too late; Felix's plan had worked. Right before he blacked out, he caught Steve's eyes as he crawled into the hatch and managed to give him a smile that said, "This is okay."

When Felix awoke, he expected the searing pain of the Entity stripping him of his memories; his head throbbed, but he remembered everything. Why? Then he opened his eyes, and realized he wasn't by the campfire at all. He was in the basement, and Ghostface was staring at him. Felix instinctively tried to run as his heartbeat raced, but he realized his whole body was naked and bound tightly; a rough cloth that tasted of salt and sweat and... something else had been shoved in his mouth and tied in place so he couldn't even scream.

"P-please," he tried to say, but it came out as a strained, incomprehensible grunt instead. Ghostface seemed to understand, though. Ghostface liked it when he begged... was he going to make him beg for his own death? Still, Ghostface continued to stare at him, saying nothing, not moving. He had a camera in his hands, and Felix suddenly noticed one wall was just pictures of...of himself. The back of his vest as he worked on a generator. Holding Steve after his escape. Taking Dwight down from the hook. Even a picture of his

naked, bound body next to Dwight's and Élodie's corpses while he was unconscious. Bile rose in his throat but he couldn't throw up with the cloth filling his mouth. There were even more pictures—his body posed in different ways in the basement, Ghostface's hands greedily placed all over it. A shiver passed through him when he realized from the pictures that Ghostface had cleaned the mud from him, Dwight's blood, even washed his hair.

He could feel though, that he hadn't done anything else to him... yet. He redoubled his struggles against the rope as he realized Ghostface wanted him awake when he did. He heard the camera click again as he grunted and writhed, but though the ropes were less painful they were even harder to escape than the hook. If he could just reach that knot—click—maybe he could free his hands and get his legs free—click—so he could gain some distance...

It was no use. After several minutes of struggling, Ghostface's camera constantly flashing, he finally gave up and looked at his captor, pleading with his eyes just to end this. Ghostface took that picture as well and placed it directly in Felix's face so he could see how desperate, how helpless, how *pathetic* he looked in that moment. Ghostface wanted him to see just how fucked he was. Felix felt tears spilling out again as his hope was taken from him—that excited Ghostface even more. He quickly untied Felix's legs, making sure to leave him on the floor so he couldn't use his hands to get up and start running.

Ghostface went to a locker and pulled out a stiff leather collar and quickly wrapped it around Felix's throat, pushing his neck into an unnaturally upright position. He heard a lock click into place behind his head, and Ghostface attached a short chain to a ring on its front. He pulled Felix out of the basement like a dog on a leash, taking pictures all the while and occasionally showing them to Felix to remind him of his place. Felix tried to run, but only succeeded in stumbling on the hard wood of the killer shack floor. Ghostface led him to his friend's dead bodies, their horrific wounds still fresh. He took his picture next to all of them, capturing the anguish on his face with each new shot. Felix took no small pleasure in noting Steve's body was not among them.

He led Felix back to the foundry, where the hatch was still open.

Felix perked up when he heard it, but Ghostface was taunting him with it. He gave Felix just enough rope to be within inches of the hatch but unable to escape through it. Finally, Ghostface was bored with his mind games, or perhaps satisfied with how thoroughly he had broken his victim. He pulled Felix away from the hatch and slapped him hard across the face, the force rattling Felix's teeth in his mouth. His grunt was hardly audible. Ghostface pushed him roughly to his knees and untied the cloth behind his head and pulled it and the rough gag out.

Felix gasped as the pressure was released from his mouth; he opened his mouth to beg once more, but Ghostface was already shoving Felix's face into his dirty boot. Felix looked up, questioningly, but Ghostface shoved his face back down. *He wants me to lick them clean. Sadistic fuck.* Felix had no choice but to do it. His boots tasted of blood and dirt, and Felix found himself gagging more than once. The collar made it hard to position his head correctly, but Ghostface clearly wasn't going to give him any relief on that front. He heard the camera flash repeatedly as he worked.

After what felt like an eternity, Ghostface seemed satisfied. He made sure to show some of the pictures to Felix, who at this point simply felt numb. He could see it in his own dead eyes in the photos, and that filled him with a new rage. He had expected death when he sacrificed himself for Steve. He just wanted that now, for the Entity to reincorporate him by the campfire with no memory of this...

Ghostface was ready to move on now. Felix's submission had excited him and he pulled his victim roughly to his knees. He tied Felix's ankles together loosely enough that he could move on his knees but tightly enough that he would never be able to run. He forced Felix's mouth open and probed his mouth once more with his fingers. He cocked his head inquisitively, still silent, as Felix let it happen. With his other hand he slapped him even harder than before; Felix realized he wanted him to suck. Felix did his best, prompting even more photos. Two fingers became three, then four, and then Ghostface removed his hands and pinched Felix's exposed nipples with crushing force. Felix cried out involuntarily, and that seemed to be the breaking point for Ghostface. Without warning, he pulled aside his robes, revealing his chest and...and his hard dick.

Felix had experimented with men before, but it had always been a rough, drunken kiss at a party or at most a handjob performed on him. He had never had to suck a dick before, and Ghostface's was not small. His captor loved the frightened look on his face, and snapped another pic before grabbing Felix by the hair and rubbing the head and shaft of his dick all over Felix's face as if asking him to savor it.

Felix obediently opened his mouth, hoping he could finish this as quickly as possible. He did his best to run his tongue down the length of the shaft, and took as much as he could in his mouth, using his tongue as best he could. The camera didn't stop flashing as he bobbed; Ghostface wanted more though, because suddenly he grabbed Felix's head with both hands and pushed Felix's face fully into his groin so his nose was pressed into the hard muscle above Ghostface's groin and his beard was pressed against the other man's balls. It smelled of sticky sweat, and Felix gagged; he couldn't breathe, but Ghostface was directing his movements now, and Felix could only try his best to perform or he was sure he would feel the sting of the knife.

Hot, sticky precum was already coating his tongue, and he almost choked as a small wave of cum filled the back of his throat. He flexed involuntarily against the ropes binding his arms, desperately wanting to push the other man out of him, but his hands were stuck fast, completely useless to him. Ghostface abruptly pulled out, coating his face with it so it ran down his cheek. Felix tried to spit out what was in his throat but Ghostface grabbed him by the chin, his fingers roughly pushing into Felix's cheeks, and stared into his eyes until he swallowed. He took more pictures as he spread his cum around Felix's face. Somehow, he was still hard, as if the Entity had granted him this power specifically to torture survivors, and he pushed Felix into him once more to suck.

Felix wasn't sure how many times they went through this cycle; he lost track after the fourth time, but each time Ghostface wanted him to swallow a portion and spread the rest on his naked body. Before long, Felix knew almost every part of his body was covered; he felt completely debased, and Ghostface still wasn't done with him. After what seemed an eternity, Ghostface showed him the pictures of his own body, covered in his captor's cum, his face buried as deeply as it

could go on the other man's dick, sucking his balls, licking the head, all while tied, helpless, and pathetic.

Felix let out a soft whimper, and Ghostface squeezed his balls again, possessively, with crushing force that made Felix scream from the pain. Ghostface kicked him them and pushed him roughly to a corner of the foundry. He replaced the gag, but not before smearing the interior cloth with a great deal of the cum from Felix's bound body. Felix knew this moment was coming but wasn't quite prepared; Ghostface tied the rope around his torso to anchor points on the ceiling nearby, then untied his ankles and lifted him in the air. Ghostface bent his legs so his ass was exposed and tied his knees with a short rope to his biceps and his ankles to the ceiling. Felix groaned, knowing what was coming, but powerless to stop it. He struggled, but the ropes suspending him held him fast and he couldn't make a sound through the cum-soaked gag.

It was hard for him to see what was happening beneath his waist with the collar still locked firmly around his neck, but he could see Ghostface taking more pictures of him. He could feel Ghostface's dick, still impossibly hard, pressed against his ass...but it didn't penetrate him yet. Ghostface was content to toy with him. He grabbed Felix's thighs, pulling him close, so he was swinging like a helpless pendulum and bouncing against Ghostface's groin, his ass just waiting to be impaled.

Then, abruptly, Ghostface took a dark cloth and blindfolded him. Felix couldn't see anything through it; he was completely blind now. He whimpered again, and heard another excited sigh through the mask at the sound and he cursed himself for making it, but he was afraid. He'd never been fucked before. And now he wouldn't even know when it was coming. He begged again through the gag, but no sound escaped.

And then...nothing.

Felix waited for something to happen, but Ghostface seemed content to let him hang there. He redoubled his efforts to struggle, but it was hopeless. He was hanging like a piece of furniture, exposed, but powerless to do anything about it. Felix didn't understand why he'd been left alone. Maybe Ghostface was tired, or maybe he wanted to

savor the experience. Maybe this was part of his torture. As the hours passed, Felix tried again and again to call out to Ghostface, to Steve, to the Entity, to *anyone*, to let him down, or at least give him his sight back, but only muffled grunts made their way through the gag. He desperately wanted to wipe Ghostface's cum off his body; he could feel it coating him, pooling in places, but he couldn't do anything about it.

Felix wasn't sure how much time had passed when Ghostface finally returned; he thought it must be five or six hours at least. He'd rubbed the skin around his wrists raw from struggling against the coarse rope that bound him. He'd slept for some time, and awoken in the same prison. Now all the strength had left his body. When he felt the first fingers in his asshole, he was startled from his listless daze; he cried out in surprise, and then pain, then pleasure, then pain again as more fingers entered him and opened his hole.

Then, without warning, he felt the head enter him slowly. He did his best to relax as Ghostface's dick slid farther and farther inside him, until he thought he could hardly bear it, yet it just kept going deeper. Then, without warning, Ghostface grabbed his waist and started to rhythmically thrust; Felix's moans filled the gag as the thrusts became deeper, longer. Ghostface's hands curled around the top of Felix's thighs so he could get a better grip as he finished violently. Felix felt a warmth inside him to match what he'd felt in his throat.

Without so much as pulling out, Ghostface started thrusting again; this time, his own cum acted as lube as he pumped another load into Felix, then a third, and fourth. Felix floated, sightless and gagged in a sea of pain and pleasure, moaning weakly against the strong hands that grasped his thighs. After the fifth, Ghostface's dick still filling him completely, the other man removed his gag and kissed him deeply, biting his lips. Felix found himself kissing him back, desperately trying to see around his blindfold so he could catch a glimpse of Ghostface without his mask. The moment was so strangely intimate that he felt hollow and empty when Ghostface abruptly pulled out of him and cut him down so he roughly hit the floor. He could feel the cum leaking from his ass as it slowly tightened once more.

Felix waited then for the stab that would finally bring release, kill

him and return him to the campfire, but it didn't come. Instead he felt rough hands pick him up and haul him over his captor's shoulder. *The hook, then.* But then he heard the sound of the hatch growing louder, and Ghostface unexpectedly removed his blindfold. Felix blinked against the harsh light in the foundry, trying to make his eyes focus. Ghostface showed him one last photo then, the moment of their kiss when he was still inside him. Underneath the photo the words "Come back soon" were written in black ink.

Felix didn't quite understand the significance of that, or didn't want to. Still without a word, Ghostface dropped him unceremoniously into the dark void of the hatch, still bound and unable to respond.

When Felix awoke by the campfire, he didn't feel the memories being stripped from him, and for a moment he was afraid he would open his eyes and find himself back in that basement. But then he moved his hands and realized they were no longer bound. He opened his eyes to see David, Nancy, and Steve by the fire, and breathed a sigh of quiet relief. He looked at his wrists and the other parts of his body where the ropes had bound him tightly, which still ached. The Entity had seen fit to leave small scars as a memory of his time with Ghostface.

Steve jumped up when he saw Felix wake up and rushed over to give him a bear hug. Felix was still overwhelmed, and the memory of his torture made his body ache with phantom pain, but he let Steve wrap his arms around him. Clearly, Steve remembered what had happened. He was quickly becoming an anchor for Felix in this place, something real he could hold onto to keep him sane. Someone who could help inspire him to keep hope that he would escape—or rather, that *they* would escape together. Or at least, his embrace was a welcome reprieve from the ordeal he'd just experienced.

"You saved me, again," Steve said simply, and Felix could tell from the waver in his voice that he was getting closer to his breaking point than ever before. Felix felt he was, too. It filled him with a quiet despair. He had to get them out of there. He wasn't sure how long they would last, even with all their friends there to help them.

"You saved me too," Felix said. "And I made it back here as I always

do.” Steve was tactful enough not to ask what had happened after he escaped, but Felix saw his eyes glance to the scars on Felix’s wrists. He pulled the cuffs of his dress shirt, mercifully reformed by the Entity, down to cover them. He felt a stiffness in his vest as he did, and he reached into the pocket where the Entity had recreated his favorite pocket square. Inside, he found a stack of the photos Ghostface had taken of him, and fought the urge to vomit. He quickly put them back inside his pocket before Steve could see them. “Come back soon” floated in the forefront of his mind for a few moments.

He had to find a way out of this place. He would, for himself, for Steve, and everyone else trapped in this Hell.

3. Chapter 3

Felix reached for Steve's warmth beside him, but his questing fingers felt only the slight depression in the mattress where he'd lain. He heard the shower running, and surmised Steve had gotten an early start today. He arched his back, trying to wake himself up, and ran his fingers through his hair. He glanced out the windows—Steve must have opened the curtains—at the bright morning sun rising over the Berlin sky. He had a meeting today about the Dyer Island Restoration Project at his firm.

Felix felt wonderful; he'd never been so rested, so content with his life, as he was in that moment. He went to check on Julia in her crib; she was still, mercifully, asleep, her expression serene. He wondered what six-month-olds dreamed about and smiled at her with all the love in his heart, though something seemed strange. *Why wasn't she older?* He brushed the thought aside, closing the door to her nursery softly.

He decided he'd peek in on Steve in the shower, maybe sneak in some quick fun before they had to get ready for work. *Wait*, he thought, *when did Steve move to Germany with me?* And then, *How did we meet?* He pushed aside his confusion as morning fog and entered the bathroom quietly, hoping to sneak up on his husband. Felix could see him conditioning his hair through the partially-fogged glass door and stripped quickly. He slipped in behind him and grabbed Steve's waist, moving his fingers playfully down to his thighs.

"You think we have time for this?" Steve laughed as he turned around and pulled Felix closer to him. He pulled Felix in for a warm, wet kiss and Felix closed his eyes.

Then Steve bit hard into his lips, and he cried out in shock, but when he opened his eyes he saw only black. He tried to reach for the heavy cloth that had somehow blinded him so completely but found his hands were bound behind his back; he struggled, and called out for Steve to help him, but then he was gagged, too, and he realized he was suspended, his legs tied back so he was completely exposed.

Then the blindfold was removed and he realized the shower was

gone, Steve was gone, their Berlin flat was gone; the person standing over him was Ghostface, it was his teeth that had bit into Felix's lips, and he wanted more. A cold hand wiped a tear from Felix's eye before it could fall and then his fingers wrapped themselves around Felix's thighs, hungrily, possessively, and he felt a hard bulge press against him...

Felix screamed as he woke up by the campfire, and found Steve already sitting next to him, and his head was in the American's lap. He wondered for a moment if this was a waking echo of his dream, but when he saw Steve's nervous blush he realized it wasn't.

"Uh, sorry," Steve started, "You started thrashing in your sleep and I wanted to support your head so you didn't hurt yourself."

Felix smiled, feeling a blush creeping onto his own face. "Thanks, Steve. That was—that was nice of you."

"I mean," Steve went on, starting to babble now, "I wanted to help, after all you've done for me; I wasn't trying to, um—"

"Is this the smooth-talking that worked with the girls in Hawkins?" Felix said playfully. When Steve's face darkened and his legs stiffened, he knew he'd made a mistake. He'd forgotten the strange cultural attitudes Americans could have.

"I'm not coming on to you, if that's what you think," he said. "I'm—I'm not into men and you're, what, 5 years older than me? More?" Felix tried to pretend the words didn't hurt a little. He wasn't sure when he'd started having feelings for Steve, but they'd been through Hell and back together, who knows how many times? Maybe the Entity had allowed them to remember those few times to give them hope, to bleed them dry a little longer, but he couldn't say.

Felix sat up abruptly, a strange piercing ache he hadn't felt in a long time hitting his heart. He had a girlfriend in the real world, and a *child*, why was he even letting himself feel this way?

"Forget it," he said, a forced smile on his lips. "A bad joke." Steve looked a little upset with himself.

"I didn't mean that," he said quickly. "I mean, if I *were* into men, you would—uh, I mean, I like you a lot, and you've saved my life so many times now and you, I, uh, you're like a brother to me now and —"

"I understand, Steve," Felix said, cutting off his rambling. "We need to work together to get out of here and...I count you as a good friend as well." Belatedly, he noticed Nancy was looking at them over the fire, a sad, wry smile on her face. She caught his eye and gave him a look that he couldn't decipher, but it faded quickly as she continued her conversation with David.

"Was it letting you dream again?" Steve asked, changing the subject abruptly and turning Felix's attention back to him. Felix didn't think it was the right time to mention the nightmare from which he'd just awoken, and the wonderful start it had had for him.

"Yes. Nothing pleasant, as always," Felix lied. Or, he partially lied. "It only lets me have nightmares. It taunts me with images of the parents the Pariahs lost on Dyer Island trapped in a place like this, but different. Maybe worse. I don't know. I don't even know if it's real, if they're really there or they're just illusions the Entity uses to torture me." That was true enough. He hadn't told Steve about what his sacrifice had cost him, though the scars remained. Felix wasn't sure how many Trials he'd been through since then, but he somehow knew he had mercifully not seen Ghostface since that night.

"I'm sure they are," Steve said. "Your real father would never have led you here, I know it."

Felix wasn't so sure. Even if his father hadn't done it voluntarily, he might have had no choice. And who knows what years and years in this place could have done to twist him, change his mind, make him willing to do anything to escape or lessen his pain? He grabbed his legs involuntarily and drew them into his chest as a shiver passed through him at the thought.

They sat in silence for a while, the fog still quiet all around them. Felix could hear Nancy telling David some of the stories Steve had told him, about the "Upside Down", and a creature that the Entity had lured here from it along with the two of them. It sounded crazy

to Felix, if only because it had happened in the real world and no one had heard about it, but he knew it was true. He still remembered the story Steve had told him and his death at the Demogorgon's hand.

"Are... are *you* into men, Felix?" Steve asked, startling Felix so much he almost fell off the log on which they sat. His voice feigned disinterested curiosity.

"Sometimes," Felix said, as earnestly as he could. "I'm into... I'm into people. And sex for me is just an extension of that, whatever the... configuration, you might say in English." Steve nodded, and Felix wondered why he'd asked.

"But you have a girlfriend in the real world, don't you?"

"I do...or I did: Anja. Élodie said I've been here for three years, at least. I have no illusions that she is waiting for me." He choked a little on the words, because they had been truly happy together. He hadn't realized what he was saying was true until Steve had forced him to give his thoughts a voice, but as he did their truth was self-evident.

He still remembered their trip to Paris together, the padlock they'd put on a bridge above the Seine. He wondered if it was still there, a silent, unknown monument to a relationship that had been taken from him at the height of their happiness. They'd conceived their child together that night, they'd later learned, the child Felix might never know: Julia, Élodie had told him, though she didn't know any more than that. "I don't blame her for that," he said after a moment, and it was true. He had loved her enough to want her to be happy without him. Maybe she was even mad at him, and thought he'd simply abandoned her when things were starting to get tough. He hoped, if that was so, that it made it easier for her.

"I'm sorry."

"Me too," Felix said simply. "What about you? Is there a girl back in Indiana waiting for you?"

Steve shook his head, though Felix caught his eyes glance briefly at Nancy. "I loved a girl, but we realized it didn't work. It took me a

while to realize that, but I finally did.” He smiled, as he always did when he thought of home. Everyone in the Entity’s world knew that feeling. “My friend Robin set me up with a few girls in town but it didn’t work out with any of them. The attraction was there, but my heart wasn’t.”

“What he’s saying is he was a real heartbreaker,” Nancy cut in from across the fire. “All the girls in town wanted to date the great Steve Harrington.”

“It’s the Farah Fawcett hairspray,” Steve said, and they all laughed, a rare occurrence since they’d been trapped in this place.

“When we get out of here,” Felix said, “you’ll find someone that makes your heart race again. I promise.”

Steve gave him a strange, almost fearful look; Felix couldn’t read what he was thinking. “I hope you’re right,” was all he said, and Nancy wrung her hands in what Felix knew was a sign of her anxiety.

“Do you really think we can find a way out?” Nancy asked.

“We have to,” David said, speaking up for the first time. “This can’t be for nothing. There must be something we can do, there fuckin’ has to be.” Felix didn’t share David’s conviction; how could they learn anything when their minds were erased after almost every Trial? How could they know if the notes they’d found—the journal of Benedict Baker, notes, and other scraps of information and arcana they’d retained from half-remembered Trials in the realms in which they died over and over—were even real, and not planted by the all-powerful being that made this place? “Have any of you found anything since the last Trial?” David pressed.

Steve sighed. Felix knew he found David’s insistence that they compare notes draining; every time they awoke with David, he forced them to wring their minds for any useful scrap of information they could pool together. Yui, Zarina, Jake, Cheryl, and now Élodie always enthusiastically joined him. Felix tried to contribute, but he understood why it was draining for Steve: in all the times they’d awoken together, Felix couldn’t remember a time when new information had been shared. It was almost worse to try so hard and

still come up with nothing.

That fact made it all the more surprising when Steve suddenly spoke up. “I found a note in one of the rooms in that realm that looks like the lab in Hawkins. You know it, Nancy?” She nodded. They’d all been there before; Felix wondered why Steve remembered it so clearly. “Felix, you said the realms were strangely designed, didn’t you?”

The architect nodded. “The buildings are always strange, like poor replicas of something in the real world. They’re stitched together in ways that don’t make practical or architectural sense at times and are impossible in others. Claudette told me once that the natural elements in the realms: the trees, the grass, and so on are much the same: uninspired and imperfect copies of the real thing.”

“That got me thinking,” Steve went on, “Nancy and I knew this lab. It existed in the real world. The Entity copied it, imperfectly, to create a place to torture us. I think some of the things it places in them are replicas of things in the real world, too, especially in places that the Entity has touched in some way. And where the Entity has been in the real world, it stands to reason that some of the things it draws inspiration from include information from people who have encountered it before, and maybe even information about how to get out that it copies blindly, or perhaps can be *tricked* into copying by people trying to help us.”

“Mate, just tell us what the fuckin’ note said before the fog closes in!” David interjected, rubbing his knuckles impatiently.

“Jesus, fine. It mentioned Vigo. You remember him?”

“Yes,” Nancy said at once. “He’s the one the journal said managed to find a way out, right? And may have created the Hatch?”

Felix groaned inwardly. They’d fought for hours once on the subject of whether Vigo was real or a tantalizing piece of misinformation placed as bait for them by the Entity so they still had hope of escape as they were being tortured. Only the fog rolling in had stopped that argument. He chose to believe Vigo had escaped this place, if for no other reason than he *needed* to believe it.

“Not quite,” David said. “We know, or think we know, he found a way out of the *Void*. We don’t know that this place and that place are the same. I reckon the *Void* is something different. Might be he’s trapped here still.”

“Sure, whatever,” Steve said. “Point is, the note said he found a way to use the fog to create things.”

“Come off it,” David scoffed. “How do you make something from fucking fog?”

“It makes sense, though,” Felix said. “The fog rolling in on us is what signifies that the Trial is about to start, right? What if the Entity uses it to create these realms? Like I said, they’re imperfect copies. For that matter, my own clothes are imperfect copies of what I wore in the real world.” He pointed to the orange ski jacket he’d woken up in. “I remember this jacket; I wore it when I was 18 on a ski trip with my mother. The entity somehow *made this* for me to wake up in. It constructed it from my memories. How?”

“And how does it reform our bodies every time after we die?” Nancy added, voicing the disturbing corollary to Felix’s observation that they had all been thinking. No one wanted to think about what it meant if their bodies were being remade from the fog itself.

“So, what, we just go out and gather some ‘fog’ and form it into a door, and that’s it?” David wasn’t so easily won over. “Then we just fuck off through it?”

“It obviously won’t be that easy,” Felix said, fighting the urge to roll his eyes.

“Are you saying you don’t believe me?” Steve asked, growing a little indignant.

“I dunno,” David said, scratching his chin. “I believe you, I do. But what if that’s just the Entity taking the piss?”

“You could say that about everything we’ve learned so far,” Felix said. “Why do you think so many people hate these sessions? We’re stuck in Plato’s cave: for us these shadows of the real world are all we

have to go on. We have no choice but to treat them as our reality.”

“Alright,” David said dejectedly. Steve nodded at Felix as if to thank him for standing up for him.

“Did the note say anything else?” Nancy asked.

“It mentioned that Vigo had a laboratory somewhere, but not how to get there. That’s all I remember.”

“And if we find it, we can reverse engineer his technique?” Felix was dubious. They had no control of where the Entity sent them when the fog rolled in.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “Maybe.”

The others started arguing, but Felix was lost in thought. Had Vigo been imprisoned in this world as they had? Forced to endure these endless Trials? Or was there more to that story?

Felix took a deep breath. They’d called him a visionary, once; he’d spent much of his life creating something from nothing. He smiled as he remembered the wooden miniatures of buildings his father had once helped him build in the library in their home in Coburg. He closed his eyes and pictured the first miniature they’d made together, a recreation of the Amalienburg in Munich. It was Felix’s first exposure to the Rococo style of architecture, and it had fascinated him.

He imagined, in his mind’s eye, creating that structure again, forming it not from wood as he and his father had, but from the fog itself, forming the structure with mist and solidifying it into the distinct lines that defined the Amalienburg. He felt a piercing headache begin to form in his mind, and suddenly he heard a harsh whisper that he couldn’t understand, but he knew it was *angry*. Felix ignored both, so focused that he hadn’t noticed that the others had gone silent around him. When finally he opened his eyes, he saw a miniature copy of that Rococo structure in between himself and the campfire, just like the wooden miniature he’d made with his father.

“How did you do that?” Nancy asked, incredulous. David simply

gaped. For the first time in a long time, he saw hope in Steve's eyes, and his heart skipped a beat. Maybe this was the way out? Maybe, with enough time, he could recreate the portal that had dragged them here?

They didn't have time to discuss it any further, because they finally noticed that the fog was rolling in on them, enveloping them in its cold embrace.

4. Chapter 4

When the Trial began, in a realm that reminded Felix of his trip to the Alps (was that why the Entity had chosen that coat?), all four of them were together. Felix wasn't sure why, but he didn't question their luck. Steve, Nancy, and David began working on the nearest generator, and Felix moved determinedly through the snow to the central building. He knew finishing the central generator was a good strategy while they were early in the Trial, because it kept the remaining generators maximally far apart to give them more time and kept the Trial grounds as big as possible.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the chalet without incident, without ever seeing the killer. He started working on the generator, glancing frequently over his shoulder.

Click.

Felix froze. That sound was ingrained in his memory. He turned around, and there he was: Ghostface was only a few meters behind him, and far too close for him to run. Instead, he backed into the corner between the generator and the staircase, brandishing a small crescent wrench from the toolkit he'd found. It wouldn't do much good in a fight.

"Please," Felix said. "You don't have to do this." With his other hand, he surreptitiously grabbed a live wire in the generator. "I don't know what the Entity has done to you, but you were brought here just like we were, weren't you?" Ghostface said nothing; he simply stared. Felix had no way to know if he was even listening to what Felix was saying, much less if the words were getting through to him. "Don't you want to leave? I-I might know how to get out, and if you just help us—"

Ghostface was done listening, or done watching. He closed the distance with astonishing speed, brandishing his knife, and Felix waved the crescent wrench like a shiv and tried to drive it into Ghostface's chest, but a cold hand caught his wrist and slammed it against the generator, forcing his fingers open so he dropped it. Felix expected that, though, and with his other hand connected the wire to

Ghostface's chest, now within inches of him.

The hot buzz of electricity made the other man hiss in pain and shock; Felix scrambled past him while he had the chance, vaulted a nearby window, and ran as fast as he could from the lodge. He hadn't made it far when he rounded a corner on a broken stone wall and his boot caught on something, sending him tumbling hard into the snow. He pulled himself up frantically, turning briefly to see what he'd tripped over.

It was David. His throat had been slit cleanly, and his body rested on top of Nancy as if he'd died trying to protect her. Whatever had happened, it hadn't worked; Ghostface had stabbed her five times, once in each eye and three times in the heart. Felix had all he could do not to scream and give away his position to his pursuer. *How was this possible? He hadn't even heard them scream! Had Ghostface found Steve too? Why hadn't he hooked them? H-he just fucking killed them!*

Then he heard Steve's cry from the direction of the lodge and his heart turned to ice. They weren't getting out of here. They hadn't finished a single fucking generator. Without even pausing to think about it, Felix rushed back the way he came. Steve was on the floor, in the same position Felix had found himself in when Steve had saved him before: hands pinned above his head, Ghostface's knife lazily tracing ribbons of red on his chest.

Felix dashed in, trying to tackle him, but that wasn't going to work a second time. Ghostface pulled the blade from Steve's chest and planted it in the air, forcing Felix to turn at the last moment or impale himself. Ghostface used his momentum against him, and pushed him hard into the floor and smacked the butt of his knife hard into his head. Felix cried out, once, and then everything went black.

Felix woke up slowly, and for a moment he imagined that he was waking up in Coburg. He could almost hear his father's *tap-tap* on the wooden door of his bedroom, calling through it that he wanted Felix up early so they could go hiking today.

Cold reality set in when he felt the cold steel manacles around his wrists, ankles, and neck. The collar was anchored to the stone wall in

a part of the chalet Felix had never seen before, though it looked like a rough stone basement with no windows or furniture, just a foul drain in the center of the room. A heavy wooden door was the only feature breaking up the walls.

Ghostface had stripped him while he slept, and he wrapped his legs in his arms to fend off the chill. He thought about using the chain to strangle himself, so he could die and be done with this, but he wasn't sure he could rig it to maintain pressure after he passed out, and it would surely infuriate Ghostface. He might have tried it anyway if he knew what had happened to Steve.

Felix had no idea how long he was down there. There were no windows to gauge the passage of time, just a cold naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. He tried to manipulate the fog, as he had done before, but the cold was pervasive and he couldn't focus. All he accomplished was to give himself a splitting headache, and he collapsed to the floor as much as the chains would allow, closed his eyes and tried to imagine a better place.

After what seemed an eternity, the door opened and Ghostface came in. He crouched next to Felix and placed a hand on his shoulder. Felix was ashamed he felt a tingle run through him from the touch. "P-please. Why w-won't you just let m-me die? J-just k-kill me." He shivered as the hand moved slowly down to his lower back.

Felix saw a flash of the knife and closed his eyes, bracing for the impact in his chest, but then he felt Ghostface cover him with a rough blanket and he opened his eyes, confused. Ghostface moved one hand to caress his cheek; the touch didn't feel tender, it felt possessive, the way one might caress a treasured pet.

"T-thank you," Felix stammered, fearing what might come next. The blanket was a poor substitute for his winter jacket, but he was deeply relieved something stood between his naked body and his captor. Ghostface sighed, a strange, contented noise. "W-where is S-Steve?"

It was the wrong thing to say. Ghostface immediately withdrew his hand and punched Felix twice in the abdomen with crushing force, driving the breath from his body. He gasped, doing his best to bring in air, and by the time he recovered Ghostface was gone once more.

This time, he didn't have long to wait.

Ghostface came back in, leading Steve close behind him. His arms were tied behind his back, and Ghostface had blindfolded and gagged him firmly. He wasn't getting away, but it was somehow different than what he remembered Ghostface doing to him. The ropes were utilitarian: restrictive but functional. The way he'd tied Felix... was *purposeful*, almost artistic; it had been designed to make Felix *feel* like property, helpless. Nor had Ghostface stripped Steve, though his green sweater was tattered and stained with red.

Ghostface pushed Steve roughly to the ground, his head landing mere inches from where Felix lay prone. Felix tried to reach out and arrest his fall but the chains were too short. Steve whimpered pitifully and crawled forward on his stomach. Ghostface didn't move, and Felix took the opportunity to peel the blindfold from his friend's face and pull out the gag. Steve was crying, not from pain, Felix thought, but in fear.

"A-are you okay?"

Steve pulled himself together and nodded, but visibly shook when he noticed Ghostface staring at them. Their captor said nothing, and didn't advance to attack them either. He was waiting for something. Felix made to untie Steve's hands and Ghostface slashed the air with his knife, a clear warning. Felix moved his hands away from Steve's and contented himself with helping his friend sit up. Felix wrapped his arms around him—the chains from his manacles fell awkwardly on Steve's back—and let him cry into his shoulder; Ghostface simply watched, though he had taken out his camera now. What he was getting out of it, Felix wasn't sure. Felix felt some warm blood from Steve's wounds soak into the blanket as they sat there together.

"Where are David at Nancy?" Steve whispered into his ear.

"They're...they're at the campfire," was all Felix could bring himself to say. Steve buried his face deeper in Felix's shoulder, and only now seemed to realize his friend was naked. He was gracious enough not to comment, but Felix saw him draw back and he thought he saw a dark understanding pass through his eyes about what had happened to Felix in the last Trial where they'd been hunted by Ghostface.

Ghostface startled both of them when he kicked his knife over to Felix, who grabbed it questioningly with his free hand. Anchored as he was to the wall, he would never even reach Ghostface to use it against him. Nor did Felix suspect he would succeed if he tried. Steve certainly couldn't use it with his hands tied behind his back. That left only...

"*Verpiss dich!*" he yelled, feeling rage overtake his fear for the first time since he'd woken up. "I'm not going to do that, you fucking psychopath." Steve hadn't quite worked out what was happening yet. Ghostface merely cocked his head, the red mask tilted to one side mockingly.

Felix raised the knife to his own neck, ready to end this, confident once he was dead Steve wouldn't suffer any more than David or Nancy, rather than whatever Ghostface planned to do to him in order to break Felix's resolve. Before Steve could even react, Ghostface was upon them, grabbing Felix's wrist, crushing it until his fingers involuntarily opened and he dropped the knife. Ghostface's other hand effortlessly pushed Steve back and to the ground like a ragdoll. He kicked Felix viciously in the chest, winding him, and then punched him once in the face, taking care not to break his nose. That frightened Felix more than the sting of the blow; Ghostface didn't want to damage his plaything.

As Felix groaned on the floor, Ghostface picked up the knife and stabbed Steve in the chest, once, twice, three times, then slashed an X down the length of his back. Steve screamed with each blow, and Felix realized what Ghostface was doing. He wanted killing Steve to be the merciful choice for Felix; he wanted it to be his only option.

"Fucking stop!" Felix picked himself up, ignoring the pain in his gut, and tried to reach them to do *something*, anything, but his chains snapped taut as Ghostface continue to slash the defenseless Steve's body and his shackled hands grasped fruitlessly at the air. He cut off Steve's left thumb and Steve let out a horrible sound that chilled Felix to the bone. "Please, please, just end this mercifully and you can...you can do whatever you want to me."

Ghostface stopped for a moment, as Steve whimpered, blood pouring from the stump on his hand. He dropped Steve unceremoniously, like

a child drops a toy that no longer interests them. He approached Felix and grabbed his chin with one hand, forcing him to stare into the eyes of the red mask. Felix tried to project a look of defiance on his face, but his resolve wavered as, for the first time, he caught a glimpse of the man's eyes underneath. They were steel gray, and colder than any he'd ever seen. He was looking at Felix like a man looks at a misbehaving dog.

With his other hand, he ripped the blanket from Felix and threw it out of reach; Felix moved his hands to cover his manhood from Steve, out of some useless reflex of modesty from the real world, but Ghostface was grabbing him by the neck then, pulling him bodily into the air, and Felix tried to grab his captor's wrist, but the chains were attached to the shackles on his ankles and he couldn't reach his neck. Felix desperately tried to pull in a breath as the vicelike grip tightened on his neck and his feet flailed helplessly in the air. Black spots began filling his vision and he heard Steve yelling at Ghostface but couldn't make out the words. They sounded so far away...

He realized, belatedly, what he'd done wrong. Ghostface didn't need permission and he wanted Felix to *know* he didn't need it. He would take what he wanted from them, and there was nothing Felix could do about it. That was the last thought he had before, for the second time this Trial, everything faded to black and Ghostface dropped his limp body.

Felix stepped into the shower, hoping Steve hadn't noticed the door opening behind him. Steve yelped as Felix pulled him in for a quick kiss, his fingers gripping his husband's narrow waist. "You think we have time for this?" Steve laughed, turning toward him. Felix pulled him in for a warm, wet kiss and everything was right with the world for a few moments. He pushed Steve against the shower wall as his husband's hands traveled down his back, one finger tracing a line in his lower back as it moved along the curves of Felix's body.

Felix kissed Steve's neck then, then his nipple, stopping for a moment to suck on it gently as Steve moaned. He moved farther and farther down on Steve's chest, as the water from the rainfall showerhead trickled down his husband's chest and fell on his nose and beard. Then Steve let out a piercing scream, and Felix abruptly stood up,

wondering if he'd done something wrong. He noticed Steve's thumb had disappeared and cried out, but the flesh burned brightly orange, as if it had been cauterized with a hot iron only moments before.

"What happened to your hand?" he cried, grasping it tightly in his own. But Steve wasn't listening.

"What the fuck is that?" he was saying, seemingly to the air, "What the fuck are you going to do? Back off him you psycho!" He was shaking now, and Felix couldn't seem to get through to him.

"Steve, what's wrong? Who are you yelling at?"

Then the shower faded like morning mist, and Felix found himself once more in the cold cellar of the chalet, chained and on the floor. He realized Steve had been yelling at Ghostface, and not for his own benefit. Ghostface was...*Fuck!* Felix's stomach dropped as he realized those cold hands were touching his balls, caressing them with that same possessive touch, then putting some sort of ring around them and shoving his shaft into a stainless steel tube that could barely contain it, even flaccid as he was. He heard the distinctive sound of a lock clicking as Ghostface withdrew a key. Felix had heard of these before, when his friends had taken him for a weekend trip in Amsterdam and they'd gone to a sex club: it was a chastity cage.

"You fucking freak," Felix muttered groggily as his consciousness returned. Ghostface dangled the key in front of Felix's face mockingly, pointed at Steve, and shook his finger. *What the fuck does that mean? Won't this disappear when I wake up by the campfire? Does he know something I don't?* Then Felix remembered the photos. They'd been with him every time he'd woken up since the last Trial where he'd faced Ghostface. He hadn't shown them to anyone, especially Steve, but they returned somewhere to his body no matter whether he died or escaped in the previous Trial. *Will this...cage be the same?*

Steve started panicking as Ghostface produced another chastity cage and moved to him now, pulling his pants down. "Get off me you fuck!" But his hands were still bound, and within moments Ghostface had enclosed his dick in hard steel and locked it. His hands didn't linger on Steve, though, as they had on Felix; he even pulled up Steve's pants to cover the cage. If Felix hadn't seen it happen, he

would never have been able to tell.

Ghostface dragged Steve to the wall perpendicular to Felix and added more rope, fixing his biceps together behind his back and tying everything together around his neck and under his groin so Steve had extremely limited mobility. He produced some kind of black leather muzzle then, with a built-in gag in the shape of a penis. Steve blanched visibly as Ghostface fastened and locked the collar of the muzzle behind his neck. He pulled the mouthpiece up, and Steve pressed his lips together firmly, but Ghostface pinched his nose until his captive's cheeks were red and he was finally forced to open his mouth and admit the gag.

Ghostface tightened the straps mercilessly, then locked each of them in place with a small padlock. He attached a chain to the top of the muzzle and fixed it to the wall. Steve grunted, but very little sound escaped. Ghostface still wasn't done; he produced a pair of ophthalmic specula and put them on Steve so he couldn't close his eyes even if he wanted to. When Steve tried to kick him, Ghostface forced him into a cross-legged position, tied his ankles together, and attached them to the rope encircling his torso.

Felix had already surmised the purpose of this, and said nothing. Nothing he said would matter now. Steve would be forced to watch whatever Ghostface did to him. He looked at Steve, a silent apology on his face. He was annoyed when Ghostface snapped that picture and showed it to him, forcing him to see how owned he was. A purple bruise had already blossomed on his face where Ghostface had punched him, and dark red marks in the shape of hands spread out from underneath his steel collar like the wings of a perverse butterfly. He pulled Felix's chin away from the wall with Steve and snapped another picture, posing next to Felix as if they were friends on a hiking trip and making sure to keep Steve's helpless, angry face visible in the background (what little of it wasn't covered by the muzzle, anyway).

It was truly sickening, but then Ghostface was just getting started in earnest. He moved the chain of the manacles around Felix's wrists to the wall above him, so his arms were fixed above his head. Then he forced a gag into Felix's mouth with a funnel attached, and Felix couldn't even begin to guess at its purpose until he felt a warm liquid

trickling into his throat. His eyes widened in disgust and he started to gag, but the piss just kept coming and he was literally going to drown in it if he didn't start swallowing... so he did.

Felix focused on accepting it, pretending the hot bitter liquid was some foul tea, trying to ignore Steve yelling into his muzzle on the near wall. He could hardly hear him, but he knew looking into Steve's eyes right then would break him utterly.

When Ghostface was finally finished, he withdrew the funnel gag and slapped Felix hard across the face. Just for fun, Felix knew, since he wasn't fighting back anymore. Ghostface grabbed his chin again and his fingers dug cruelly into his cheeks, forcing his mouth open. He pointed his head at Steve, who was furiously struggling against his bindings, and when their eyes met Felix felt relieved that he saw concern and fury in his eyes and not disgust or hatred.

Felix wondered whether that would change as Ghostface turned his head back and moved his mask enough to spit into Felix's open mouth. Frankly, Felix preferred it to his piss. Ghostface started just as he had the time before, with his fingers. Felix didn't wait to be hit again before he started sucking.

Finally, he readjusted the mask and cocked his head again, expectantly. Felix's eyes darted to the growing bulge in the robes in front of his face and he didn't have to wait long before Ghostface grabbed him by the hair, swept his robes aside, and forced Felix's mouth onto it. The experience was exponentially worse because he knew Steve was watching him do it. As Ghostface came for the first time, forced him to swallow, and spread the rest on his face, Steve made a noise like a cornered animal.

Felix wished he would be quiet; this was just beginning. But even Felix didn't know how right he was. This time, Ghostface just kept going. Twice. Three times. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Felix's jaw and neck were burning, and he could hardly muster the energy to use his tongue. His stomach turned eventually and he vomited nothing but saliva and semen, but Ghostface hardly let him catch his breath afterward before he was grabbing his hair again and pulling him back into his place.

Steve's muffled, indignant shouts had subsided somewhat, and for that Felix was grateful. He didn't know if he could ever meet Steve's eyes again. Finally, Ghostface seemed satisfied, and produced an identical muzzle to the one he'd placed on Steve. For Felix though, he added a padded leather blindfold. Watching was Steve's job; being helpless, his senses taken away and waiting to submit to his captor, was Felix's.

Ghostface didn't replace the blanket, and Felix soon started shivering again. He thought Ghostface had left, but he had no way to tell. He could still hear Steve struggling, but his grunts were quieter now, and Felix couldn't see what he was doing. Felix didn't bother; the manacles were solid steel and firmly locked, and his arms were exhausted from being forced upright for so long. He didn't want to imagine what he looked like to Steve, but the images from the photos Ghostface had taken leapt, unbidden, to his mind.

Felix fought the urge to weep into his blindfold. He didn't want Steve to see that, and he certainly didn't want Ghostface to take pleasure in it. Instead he let his mind wander back to his pleasant dream. He decided right then and there that, once he got out, he would make that flat a reality, though after what he'd seen today he doubted Steve would ever be a part of it.

Eventually, Ghostface returned. Felix didn't know it until his arms fell abruptly from above his head and he felt himself be dragged, bodily, away from the wall. He couldn't see what was happening, but he felt himself being locked into some metal contraption that forced him on his hands and knees, like a dog. The manacles were removed and replaced with the steel cuffs on the device for his wrists, forearms, ankles, and legs, as well as a fixed collar and additional leather straps for his body. The only support it offered Felix was a padded leather cushion on which he could rest his chest.

It was obvious what was about to happen, and Felix wasn't surprised when he felt the first questing fingers enter his asshole. Steve's muffled shouts grew louder when Ghostface started to fuck him, and it seemed to excite Ghostface even more. He was insatiable, and had some supernatural ability to simply keep going when a normal man would be spent.

Every once in a while, between loads, he would pull out abruptly and flog Felix viciously. Not as a behavior corrective, but because he wanted to. Felix's screams were stifled, but in his own ears they were at least able to drown out Steve, and he could pretend for a moment that no one would know about this except Ghostface and himself, that no one but the two of them could see all of Felix's senses taken away, locked in place like a slave, both of his holes filled with a penis.

After what felt like hours, Felix's ass was so sore he felt as though he would never be able to walk again, and Ghostface finally released him, save for a set of shackles binding his wrists loosely. His arms and legs were so tired he couldn't move, so he didn't even try to run as Ghostface put him on what felt like an old mattress which hadn't been in the room when Felix still had the ability to see. Ghostface didn't remove his blindfold, but he removed the muzzle, and Felix took a deep breath. He was disgusted when Ghostface lay alongside him and pulled him into his chest, cuddling him like a lover, but he was too weak to move or do anything about it.

The killer gave off very little warmth, and he reeked of old leather and dried blood. Cold hands explored his body; Felix felt like a piece of meat, too tired even to react when a finger invaded his mouth or his ass once more. He groaned softly when Ghostface pinched both nipples, then kissed him, hard enough that he was pushing Felix's head into the thin material of the mattress with the force of his mouth.

He didn't reciprocate, but quickly realized as Ghostface punched him hard in the abdomen that it was expected of him. There was something worse about Ghostface's tongue invading his mouth that was worse than all of the other things he'd done to him; it felt somehow more intimate, as if Felix wanted it.

He thought he heard Steve crying in the background, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was finally seeing Felix so broken underneath Ghostface. Then the blindfold was removed, and Felix blinked in the dim light, which to him seemed blinding. He thought maybe it would be over, but Ghostface covered him once more in the blanket, still laying alongside him like a lover, and pulled his chin up so he had to look into the eyes of his mask.

Felix sensed the other man wanted something from him, but he wasn't sure what it was. Felix shivered then, and Ghostface pulled him even closer. Felix instinctively buried his head in the killer's chest, where the scent was overwhelming, his face resting inches from the other man's beating heart. That seemed to be the right thing to do. Ghostface's hand caressed his back tenderly, and it felt oddly as though Ghostface believed there was an actual relationship between them. How could he possibly think that? Was he actually jealous of Steve? Was that the point of this? *That's insane*, Felix thought, but the more he considered it the more it rang of truth.

Finally, Felix gathered his courage enough to speak, moving his head out to look at the masked man again. "Have...have I done well? Will you let us go?"

Ghostface ran a hand through Felix's hair, pulling it ever so slightly. Felix winced when he used the knife to cut a thick strand from the back before he gave any kind of response. Finally, Ghostface nodded. He pulled a key from his robe and handed it to Felix.

"T-thank you...sir." He wasn't sure why he said it, but it was another correct choice. Ghostface left then, pulling the door closed softly behind him. Felix struggled to stand, and collapsed to his knees when he tried. He crawled to Steve, keeping himself covered in the blanket as best he could. His friend's head hung limply now, supported mainly by the chain; his eyes were bloodshot and wet with tears. Felix removed the specula first, and Steve blinked mercifully. It took him longer to unlock the padlocks on the muzzle and the chain attached to it with the key Ghostface had given to him, but Steve swayed weakly when it came free. He rested his head on Felix's shoulder as Felix struggled with the knots; his fingers were still numb from the manacles, but eventually he managed to free Steve completely.

Felix was worried Steve would pull away from him in disgust the moment the ropes came undone. He'd been forced to watch Felix be completely broken, bred like a racehorse in a stable. He breathed a sigh of relief when Steve instead embraced him and wept.

"I'm so sorry," he said, and Felix was relieved he didn't hear any judgement in his voice. "That wasn't the first time, was it?" Felix

didn't know what to say. He didn't want to make Steve feel somehow responsible. But he decided Steve deserved the truth.

"No. I..." finally he couldn't hold back the tears. "No. But I wish you hadn't been forced to watch it. That made it so much worse."

"Did he...did he take some of your hair?" Steve asked, and it sounded as though he didn't believe what he'd seen.

"Yes." Felix didn't want to think about it; Ghostface's obsession for him was disturbing, but he knew the killer legitimately thought there was something between them, something intimate. He ran a hand absently through the now-uneven part of his hair. "Can you walk?"

"I think so, can you?"

"It was all I could do to crawl over here."

"C'mon," Steve pulled Felix to his feet. Before they moved, they each tried the key on the cages Ghostface had put on them; no luck, as they expected. Steve supported Felix to the door, one arm wrapped firmly around him. They slowly climbed the staircase into the lodge; Steve was careful to keep the blanket wrapped around Felix's naked body since it was all he had to stave off the cold.

Ghostface stood with one foot on the hatch, directly in front of the great fireplace, his elbow resting on his knee. He tossed another key at Felix's feet, one which vibrated with a strange energy.

"Thank you," Felix said again. Steve said nothing, but he didn't show his animosity verbally, for which Felix was grateful. Felix hadn't won Ghostface over enough for that. As Steve knelt to unlock the hatch, Ghostface moved forward and grabbed Felix by the waist. For the first time, he pulled off his mask while Felix wasn't blindfolded and pulled down his hood. The face underneath was handsome (Felix cursed himself for thinking it), with light brown hair buzzed short and a refined, angular jaw. He looked ex-military, though from the camera Felix had guessed he was once a reporter.

He grabbed Felix by the waist and pulled him in roughly, kissing him deeply, biting his lip. Felix didn't fight back. As soon as the hatch

opened Steve grabbed Felix's hand and pulled him out of Ghostface's arms. He waited to jump in until Felix was safely inside, but Felix noticed how Ghostface's gray eyes never left him as he passed through that mysterious barrier and his mind faded.

5. Chapter 5

As before, Felix remembered everything when he awoke by the campfire. His pocket—now of a jacket he remembered wearing on his trip to Seoul—was heavier than it normally was. Felix realized with disgust that there were at least twice as many photos. He didn't look at them, but he had no way to get rid of them. He felt a cold weight in his pants and fury and disgust filled him when he realized that, somehow, the cage had come with him through the hatch, just like the photos.

It didn't matter much in here, but what was he going to do if—*when, damn it, when!*—he got out of this place?

Steve was at the campfire, as well as Yui and Zarina. Both women were trying to rouse Steve, who had his head buried in his knees. He was rocking slowly, as if on the verge of a breakdown. Felix came over to his side and laid a hand on his shoulder. Steve started at the touch, but when he lifted his head and saw Felix he pulled him into a protective bear hug. Felix gasped, startled, as the pressure of Steve's grasp practically drove the breath from his body.

"Steve," Felix said into the other man's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

Steve pulled back slightly and looked at him as if he'd lost his mind.

"Don't you remember what just happened?!"

"I do," Felix said quietly.

"Wait, what?" Zarina cut in. "How can you remember what happened in a previous Trial?" Steve ignored her.

"Then how can you ask me, 'what's wrong'?!?" He pulled back slightly from Felix, his hands gripping Felix's biceps as if to shake some sense into him. "This. Is. Not. Fucking. Okay."

"None of this has ever been okay," Felix said, his eyes dropping. "This is...this is Hell, Steve. Even in death, we can't escape it. This is just...a new kind of torture."

“No,” Steve said flatly. “Fuck that. Fuck this place.” He screamed, a sound full of impotent rage. Felix winced; it was not the first time he’d heard that noise by the campfire, but it was the first time he’d heard it from Steve. “I’m not letting that happen to you, or to me, or to fucking any one of us, ever again.”

Yui and Zarina both wore curious expressions on their faces. Steve had been trapped here longer than both of them; he’d seen Trial after Trial, and neither of them had seen him react this way. Of course, truly remembering what had happened was a rather new development, even if the ghost of a memory often remained.

“Neither of us has a choice,” Felix said, bitterly. “Sooner or later, we’re going to face Ghostface again, together, or separately. Maybe... maybe if I’m not there you won’t have to suffer through that again, and he’ll just...just kill you if he can.” Felix didn’t voice that, whether or not they were together, Felix would still have to endure it. Again. And then again, and then again...forever? His stomach dropped and he felt bile rising in his throat. *Ghostface’s plaything...forever.* “And maybe...maybe he’ll grow tired of me.” As Felix said it, he somehow knew that wouldn’t happen, not for someone truly deranged like Ghostface.

“That’s bullshit, Felix. This is not about me. He’s obsessed with you, and he wants you to himself. That’s not gonna just go away. He thinks...he fucking thinks you have some kind of *relationship*.” Yui and Zarina wore shocked expressions at Steve’s outburst, but said nothing. Steve was oblivious, though Felix felt his face redden as his eyes glanced at them.

“He’s a psychopath, Steve, but I-I can deal with it.” His voice broke, and everyone at the campfire knew he was lying. “Maybe I can-can use it against him to save us the next time. Maybe this is even an opportunity. Maybe I can get him to tell me something about a way out of here.”

“He treats you like a fucking dog,” Steve said. “You don’t teach a dog how to undo the lock on its kennel.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Felix found himself yelling, pushing Steve bodily away. “I fucking know that!” Felix was shaking now, and he ran his

hands through his hair. The part that Ghostface had cut had been replaced by the Entity. “I don’t have a goddamn choice, Steve! Why are you telling me this as if I don’t know? I didn’t choose this! I didn’t choose *any* of this...” he was growing hysterical now but couldn’t seem to calm down. He tried desperately to slow his breathing, which had become erratic.

“Steve, stop,” Zarina cut in warningly. They’d heard enough to guess what had happened. Yui seemed lost in thought, but Felix recognized the haunted look in her eyes; she was reliving a nightmare. Steve finally relented, the anger draining from his face. They sat in silence for a while as Felix composed himself.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said at last. “I just don’t know how to deal with this. I *can’t* deal with this. I just had to sit there and watch as he...as he hurt you like that.” He sighed. He brought Felix back into his arms, this time tenderly. Felix let it happen. His touch was like walking into the sun compared to the cold darkness of Ghostface. He smelled of cinnamon and a floral scent Felix thought must be the hairspray.

Felix felt Steve swallow, as if he was about to say something difficult, but he stayed silent for a long time. Felix was content to wait. Finally, he spoke, moving back slightly so he could look Felix in the eyes. “It was hard because...because I lied before. I do...I mean; I didn’t think I *was* into men but I have...I have feelings for you. And I’ve been so confused because I’ve never felt that way about a guy, but seeing that...and I was just...I couldn’t do anything to protect you. I was so fucking *helpless*.”

Felix felt his heart skip a beat. “What happened wasn’t your fault, Steve. None of this is.”

Steve shook his head angrily, some of that furious flush returning. “But it is! The whole time I was thinking about how you sacrificed yourself for me in the Trial where we faced him before. You found that key, and the hatch, and you chose to give it to me instead of escaping yourself. And I fucking let you. I saw him tearing off your clothes before I used the key. I saw what he did to you through the window. I *knew*, and I lied to myself and told myself I didn’t, so I could escape. And even then, even *then*, you came back to the lodge

in the next Trial even after you'd escaped." He was shaking now and Felix heard the brittleness in his voice. "Because Ghostface *knew* that you would."

"I would do it again, Steve," Felix said simply. "Because...I have feelings for you, too."

"I don't deserve that!" Steve said indignantly, and Felix was taken aback. "Don't you get it? I'm how he gets to you! You have to promise me that next time, you'll get out if you can, and leave me to die. If I can't do anything to protect you, then at least let me do that."

"But I—"

"Promise me, Felix." Felix saw in his eyes that he needed it.

"I promise." He didn't know what else to say, but it was enough. Steve breathed a sigh of relief, and rested his forehead against Felix's. Without really meaning to, their lips met, and it was so much better than Felix's dream. For the first time in his place, he was feeling something real. Something stirring in his heart, and he didn't want it to end.

Yui cleared her throat loudly, and the two men broke apart. Felix felt himself blush, and noticed Steve run a nervous hand through his hair, but the two women were smiling as if the four of them were sharing a private joke. "Sorry, guys," Zarina said, "But we're still here. And actually, I have something I need to tell you. I think I've found a real clue: some pages from Vigo's work journals."

"Really?" Yui's entire body tensed, like a cat getting ready to attack. "How did you remember it?"

"The Entity tried to strip it away when I woke up but I forced myself to remember as much as I could, and we all know that process is imperfect, even when we want to forget. Maybe especially then." Felix knew exactly what she meant. The Entity sometimes left vestiges of memories; Felix had always thought this was a purposeful decision, but Zarina had a point: it might be just like the imperfect copies of the real world it created in its realms. He wondered if Ghostface had arranged it so he and Steve would remember their

ordeal, by offering something to that *thing*. And the disturbing realization followed that, once he was broken enough, Ghostface might let him forget so he could repeat the cycle just so he could crush him again. Felix shivered at the thought and Steve intertwined their fingers beside him when he noticed.

“I’ve forgotten some of the details of course,” Zarina continued, “but it was part of what I think was a study of the Entity. It was an attempt to classify the Entity in organic terms. You remember the Blight?”

“I know of him,” Felix said slowly. He half-remembered escaping that killer once, bringing a pallet down on his head and getting through the exit gates at the last minute. But Zarina was shaking her head.

“Not the killer; Vigo describes the Blight as a purging event that the Entity must undergo every few years. Like a disease.”

“Isn’t blight something that affects crops?” Steve said.

“Yes, and Vigo’s journal analogizes the Entity’s organic aspect to a plant. He isn’t sure of the nature of the fog, but he knows it’s the essential essence of the thing. It’s feeding on us, our despair, our hope, our affection for each other, our desire to get out. It feeds on the killers too: their rage when we escape, their pleasure in seeing us in pain... Vigo goes on to describe something about how a survivor’s *anima* or *élan vital* becomes captured in the fog, like a Venus fly trap, except the Entity has evolved a way to feed on us until we’re no longer useful to it.” She shook her head, as if clearing a cobwebs from her mind. “I don’t know; I didn’t really understand it.

“What’s important is that he mentioned that the fog contains imprints of the worlds and the people that the Entity has consumed. It’s *conscious* in and of itself, and there is some sort of, I don’t know, relationship between our minds and the fog itself. That’s how Vigo shaped his tools, that’s how the Entity makes its realms, and that’s how it feeds on us.”

“So that’s how you were able to create that miniature,” Steve said to Felix, and Yui and Zarina turned to him inquisitively. He quickly informed them of what they had learned before their last Trial, and

what he'd been able to create. Yui looked ecstatic.

"Then we can actually do this!" she exclaimed, pushing her hair back as if ready to get to work. "Felix, tell us exactly how you did it. If we work together on this, we'll be able to do something to get out, I know it."

"The thing is, I'm not really sure," Felix said, "I'm an architect. When I'm planning a building, I design it first in my mind before I ever commit it to paper or design software."

"What's 'design software'?" Steve asked, but Zarina shushed him quickly.

"Creating that miniature was like that but I was able to... *mold* it in front of me from the fog itself. As though the fog were a *tabula rasa* on which I could imprint any design I wanted if I put enough time into it."

"Then let's try it," Yui said. "Maybe if the four of us focus we can create a door or a portal to the real world." Felix wasn't sure.

"What about the others?" Steve said.

"We'll come back for them," Zarina said quickly, and Felix wanted to believe that she meant it. "But first we have to try."

The four of them sat down and tried their best to envision a door, or a gateway, that might help them to escape. After what seemed like hours, they had produced nothing, though Felix felt a powerful migraine setting in.

"This is never gonna work," Steve said at last, and Felix didn't open his eyes to look at him, but affection for Steve filled his heart, and like a clap of sudden thunder the world shifted in his mind's eye: he saw a hundred different realities folded into one another like laminated dough; there was Steve, a pulsing whiteness without form, trapped in a thick, swirling darkness with legs like a spider.

Felix screamed when he saw he was ensnared as well, and through his own prison he saw the others: not just Yui and Zarina, but David, Nancy, Dwight, Élodie, Claudette, and everyone else he'd met in the

Entity's hell before. A thick black tendril pierced each of them like a proboscis, and he tried desperately to pull his own from his chest but it remained firmly planted within him. He screamed again as it pulsed, as though it were sucking the blood from his body, and he was filled with revulsion. As he pulled, the spidery legs tightened their grasp and he sensed he would vomit if he had anything in his stomach. If he *had* a stomach, but he had no definite form in this place.

In the distance, he could see a hole in the disgusting mass of legs and darkness, like a blister that had been drained of form, where spidery legs twitched feebly in the absence of any prey. Somehow he knew that had been Vigo's place, and a new determination filled him. He envisioned a great machete, or something akin to it, and the swirling fog took heed and solidified into one. He grabbed it and cut viciously into the tendril piercing his chest. He heard a harsh whisper screaming in his head, and all around him, but he ignored it and kept cutting.

Spidery legs stabbed at him, and like vines tried to ensnare him, but Felix was working furiously and white mist flowed out of the now-destroyed tendril, seeping like water from a crushed stem. As he pulled the last of it out of his chest, he felt that mist fall into him once more. The emotions it carried threatened to overwhelm him: the searing pain of his memory of being raped by Ghostface, the love he felt for Steve, and the anger, too, of being trapped in this place. They were his memories, his emotions, being fed to the Entity like a spider drains a fly.

Felix tried to make his way to Steve, but the harsh whisper had become a harsh shout, discordant like the sound of nails on a chalkboard, and the creature was trying to ensnare him once more. He reached for Steve but two legs circled his arms (or were they arms?), trying to bind him; Felix worked himself free and slashed viciously. He escaped, but making it to Steve, much less the others, seemed impossible. Surely if he just tried hard enough, he could make it to them...

Then Felix remembered the promise he'd made.

He turned then, seeing the hole Vigo had torn in his prison, a small

wound in the fabric of the darkness surrounding him that pulsated with a strange gold light. He made for it desperately, struggling for every inch he gained, as the air became thick with furious tendrils. He wasn't going to make it. The creature, the *thing* that encircled him was going to reclaim him, put him back in his prison and continue to feed, removing any memory Felix had of the truth of this world.

Felix had resigned himself to this when the scar Vigo had made started to pulse, and veins of gold spread out from it through the Entity. Felix wasn't sure what was happening, but the disgusting tendrils, the legs that were fighting to recapture him, suddenly slackened, their movements becoming sluggish and their grip on him weaker. He managed to move slowly toward the light, feeling a sickening vertigo; distance in this place wasn't just physical, it was also temporal, layered, somehow *different*. At times the portal looked farther away as the ether through which he crawled curled back on itself in an impossible, non-Euclidean way. If he'd been bound to his body, he was sure he would have been too sick to continue, but he wasn't, and suddenly he passed through one of these extra-dimensional folds and found himself right at the lip of the tear in the Entity's Hell.

Without even a moment's hesitation, he pulled himself through and the harsh darkness retreated as Felix found himself enveloped in a blinding white light.

6. Chapter 6

Felix blinked, slowly, and realized he had a physical form again. He was wearing the same clothes as the day when he had followed his father into the fog, all those years ago. The scars from Ghostface, even the cage, were gone. He almost cried in relief before he picked himself up from the floor and started to surveil his surroundings.

He was in a laboratory of some kind, but very unlike the ones he had seen at university for students of biology or chemistry. Some of the instruments were familiar, including graduated cylinders and other typical glassware, but most of the instruments were bizarre and he could not begin to guess at their function.

“Felix,” a man’s voice said from a corner of the room. “You made it. I rather thought you might be the first. Or, the second, as it were.” He wore an apron over an old-fashioned dress shirt and trousers; all were stained with something that glowed with its own golden light, like bioluminescent algae. His salt-and-pepper hair was drawn back behind his wire-rimmed glasses. He was handsome, with a short, well-kempt beard. Felix thought from the way he carried himself that he must be much older than he looked.

“I made it...where?” Felix asked tentatively. “Is this... is this the real world?”

“Not in the way you mean,” the other man said. Felix knew that that had been too much to hope for, but he couldn’t help but feel a crushing disappointment.

“Then...”

“My name is Vigo, which I think you already know.” Felix nodded, and he sensed the other man approved. “This is my laboratory. When I escaped the Entity, as you did, I found my way back to my world.” He opened the curtains over a glass door leading to a balcony, and Felix gasped when he saw the Charles Bridge in the distance and a city skyline he knew very well.

“But that’s—”

“We are in Prague, yes. But not *your* Prague. This is one of the worlds the Entity consumed. It’s...it *was* my world. This was my home. Now it is nothing but a tomb.” Felix didn’t want to believe what he was hearing, but when he moved closer to the window, he saw the signs of abandonment in the city: vines creeping through once meticulous stonework; entire edifices crumbling without maintenance; a large section of the Charles Bridge had collapsed into the river. Above all, he saw that the streets were empty. Cars sat abandoned, rusting as if the owner had simply left them in place. Storefronts were boarded up, the wood already rotting, and broken glass littered the street where looters—now long-dead or taken by the Entity—had destroyed what wasn’t secured.

“I don’t understand,” was all Felix could say. “This looks just like... just like my own world. How did this happen?”

“This is the Entity’s purpose,” Vigo said, gesturing to an armchair in a small sitting area. Vigo had a fire roaring in the fireplace, and every shelf of the bookcase nearby was full to bursting with arcane treatises that Felix thought would take a lifetime of work for him to understand. “Or, perhaps, it doesn’t have a purpose, or desire, but it does have a *need*. And our suffering, our hope, our love, everything that makes us thinking, rational beings, are how it meets that need.

“There are countless worlds, countless realities, that exist in this universe. The Entity’s realm is between them, at once separate from and present in all of them. It came here at first just as it came to yours: a few people vanished without a trace, here and there. Never in large enough numbers, or at the same time, or with enough similarities between incidents for all but the shrewdest to recognize the pattern. By the time people start taking notice, it’s far too late.

“It was far too late for us when I was taken. Every day I heard new stories: all the students in a school vanished one day in Pilsen, and then the next all the patients and staff in a hospital in Brno. And it wasn’t just here, it was *everywhere*. Society had already started to crumble. I confess I was one of the many who were trying to carry on as normal, as if nothing was happening, until the Entity came for me, too. I was on a plane to Melbourne for a conference, when suddenly we felt a cold fog seep through the vents. I thought it was smoke at first, that we were crashing. But then I found myself in the Entity’s

realm, just as you did. I went through countless Trials, and hardly ever with the same people, unless the Entity wanted to feed on our relationships. You see, there were simply so many of us for it to feed on. But the Entity is never satisfied.”

“I didn’t see them in that... in that place,” Felix broke in finally. “So why did I see where you went through? What happened to the billions of people that it must have taken?”

“Not billions: most of my people died as our world collapsed, before the Entity was able to take them,” Vigo said matter-of-factly. Felix supposed he had had a long time to make peace with this fact. “They couldn’t have known that was a mercy, though many must have guessed at it. But almost no one who makes it to the Entity’s realm ever manages to get out. When the Entity can no longer feed on them, it casts them aside into the Void: a place outside its realm, a vast darkness. There are no Trials there, no campfires or killers. It is an infinite nothing that exists separately from the Entity’s realm.

“I... I was the last. When I tried to escape for the fourth time, after having the same moment of epiphany as you just did, it sent me there. I was able to escape only to find myself ensnared in the Trials once more.” His face darkened, and Felix was surprised to see his hands shake slightly. “Even that torture was a welcome reprieve for me, after the Void, though I faced it alone. I expect it would have sent you there after this attempt, had you not succeeded. It senses people like us as a danger, insofar as we can say it ‘senses’ anything.”

“This attempt?”

“Yes,” Vigo said shortly. “You don’t remember it, but this wasn’t the first time you saw the realm for what it was. You’re not the only one from your world who has. But this time you got farther than you ever have before, or anyone else save me, and I was finally in a place to help.”

“How many times?”

“This was the sixth.”

“In three years? That’s—” Felix stopped immediately when he saw

the look on the other man's face.

"No, Felix. The Entity exists outside of time and space as we understand it. When Élodie was taken, for her it was three years. If you were to return now...it would be eight years, nine months, and fourteen days by my reckoning. But as I said, time isn't linear in the Entity's world. You've been through the Trial hundreds of thousands of times."

Felix was growing irrationally angry, and he found himself rising to his feet. "That...that can't be true. How could you even know that? That's almost... almost *nine years!* That I've been...No, that just can't be true. How do I even know you're who you say you are, and not some new illusion? Or, if you're real, how can I know you haven't just gone mad from the time you spent in there? How can I know you're not in league with *it*?" Felix knew he was being uncharitable, even cruel, but he couldn't stop himself.

"I have spent my life studying this being." Vigo was as calm as ever, and hadn't moved from his chair. He seemed to expect that reaction from Felix. "There was no one to help me when I finally angered the Entity enough to be sent to the Void as I did for you," he added pointedly. "It wasn't just that I was a threat: it was done feeding on my world, and ready to move to yours. You cannot know what that place is like, Felix. I spent an endless epoch figuring out how to escape it, and once I did, how I would return to my own world. I had the one benefit of being whole when I was consigned to it, or I would never have been able to keep going.

"When I finally made it back, perhaps the only person ever to do it... my reward was to return to a graveyard." Vigo stood up then and opened the balcony door. Felix followed him, and up close he saw the deterioration was much worse than he'd first thought. He saw too, the subtle differences in the city from the one he knew: not just the skyline itself, but in the style and influences of the architecture of the buildings that he did recognize.

Vigo pointed at an apartment building several blocks away, which had fared markedly better than the collapsed buildings on either side. "My wife grew up in that building. Her parents still lived there. When I returned, I did my best to find out what had happened to her." Felix

saw the other man's hands grip the railing and turn bone white. "I found her there, with my parents-in-law. I think they took part in one of the mass suicides that followed the Entity's arrival. And our son—our son was taken. He's in the Void now." Vigo turned to him then. "Do you understand now? I have *nothing* left. I can't save my world. I can't—I can't even save my son. I have tried, so, so many times. But just as the Entity's realm is at the nexus between our worlds, and all the others it has touched, the Void is outside of all of them. And even if I could find him in that dark infinite, he would never be as he was. I don't think he would even be able to reincorporate as you and I have. He was there too long, fed on for too long while I was in the Void. He's lost too much of what he was, if he has anything left."

"That leaves me only one thing." Felix finally heard the fury in the older man's voice. "I need to stop this thing from spreading to any other worlds. I have spent every day studying you, and the other people from your world, to try and stop this. Your world still has time. The Entity needs a critical mass of victims, and for now you're well below that threshold. As it takes more of you, it will gain more and stronger footholds into your world, until it consumes it as well. So believe me when I tell you I have every reason to tell you the truth. Whether or not I'm mad, you'll have to decide for yourself."

Felix felt ashamed for his reaction. A burning question had leapt to his mind, and he was afraid of the answer, but he had to know. "Is my father in that... place? The Void?"

"I'm afraid he is, Felix. There's nothing we can do for him. I'm sorry. Like my son, I fear he is lost. Perhaps not even the Entity could find him. It's where the Entity puts those who are a threat to them. The illusion that the Entity used to lure you into its realm was not your father." Felix had always suspected he couldn't save him, but hearing confirmation of it gave him a stabbing pain in his chest.

"But how do you know all this?" he finally asked. "How did you save me?"

Vigo nodded then, as if to signify that Felix was finally making sense. "How I saved you is a much longer conversation," he said quickly, "But I have something I can show you." He led Felix back inside and gestured at a strange device like a mirror on the wall, though it didn't

reflect the room. Instead it was filled with a dark, swirling fog like what he'd seen in the Entity's realm. "I've been watching through the Auris," he said simply. As Vigo spoke, Felix saw the fog part, and he saw his own body near the campfire, Steve cradling it as Yui and Zarina looked on helplessly. He saw himself thrashing violently, as though he was having a seizure. Then, like morning mist, he simply... broke apart, even his clothes. Felix jumped as he saw it; Steve was screaming, but Felix was simply gone.

"What the-what the fuck am I seeing?"

"Don't you understand?" Vigo looked disappointed in him. "You've seen the truth of that place, Felix. Without your *élan vital* to guide it, the form to which the Entity bound you simply collapsed. It's nothing but a construction of the fog, like a golem of old Jewish folklore; your soul acted as the *shem* to give it motion and purpose. The Entity uses this to create the simulated horror of the Trials and draw out its ability to feed on you. If you saw the truth, and remembered it, you would give up hope and become useless to that thing long before."

"How will they ever make sense of this?" Felix felt himself unraveling. All he could think about were his friends, and especially Steve, who were all still trapped in there. And his father, who was beyond help. "I-I just left them there."

"Do you know why you failed, the other five times?" Vigo asked harshly. "You tried too hard to save them, and it captured you again. The only reason we have a chance now is because you made it here. Even if we fail, you've denied the Entity the ability to feed on you, and you were its best source."

"I was...what?" Felix was still processing what Vigo had said about his past failures; he didn't understand what Vigo could possibly mean by the last part.

"The Entity chooses its first victims very carefully when it comes to a new world. It was able to torture you with the knowledge of your father, and the knowledge your child would someday come looking for you. With the knowledge that your girlfriend would never understand why you left. It was even able to bring you and Steve together, to give you hope, to kindle love between you, which above

all else would keep you useful to it for as long as possible.” Felix felt the color draining from his face. Vigo had really seen everything. “But more than that... you were taken from your world because Ghostface chose you.”

That was too much. Felix felt himself falling, and only barely managed to catch himself on the cold stone counter of a laboratory bench. Vigo led him back to the sitting area, but he had clearly decided Felix deserved the complete truth. Felix wished he hadn’t.

“Ghostface is a particularly evil killer,” Vigo went on, still in the same matter-of-fact voice, as if he were delivering a lecture on something mundane. “He was one of the few who wasn’t tortured to become as he is; he came to the Entity’s realm voluntarily to hunt survivors for sport. The Entity showed you to him on Dyer Island as a teenager that night when your father sacrificed himself to save you. His obsession began then. Taking you was... a reward for him. The Dyer Island Restoration Project was created specifically to lure you back to a place where the Entity already had a foothold in your world.”

Felix felt bile rising in his throat, but he had nothing in his stomach to purge. Something still didn’t make sense. “But you said I’ve been in hundreds of thousands of Trials,” he said tentatively. “Why didn’t I meet Ghostface earlier if he *chose* me as you say?”

Vigo gave him a look of pure pity, and Felix suddenly knew he didn’t want the answer to his question.

“You did,” Vigo said quietly. “More than three-quarters of your Trials have been with Ghostface, Felix. He gives offerings to the Entity to allow you to remember the last time he...violated you. Sometimes he makes Steve watch. Or he violates Steve while you are forced to watch, kills Steve, and violates you... among many other strategies. There is no limit to his perversion, but ultimately his cruelty is meant for you. As I think you know, like any stalker, he believes you have some sort of relationship. Steve is only useful to him insofar as you love him and he can use that fact to torture you.

“After twenty or so Trials, he usually has managed to break you completely and you no longer fight back. He’s... enjoyed that for

thousands of Trials at a time, or at times only a few, but eventually he asks the Entity to make you forget once more so he can begin anew. I'm sorry, Felix, but it's a cycle you've faced thousands and thousands of times. The last two Trials you remember are only the latest. This special torture has made you the single best source of pain for the Entity to feed on."

Felix didn't know what to feel about that. He just felt numb, as though every part of his body had simply locked up at hearing this new information. Should he be relieved he was free now? Should he cry? How could he ever be whole again, knowing he'd been abducted for no other reason than to serve as a sex slave for a psychopath? Not punishment for the things he'd done wrong in his life. There was no reason to it, no higher meaning other than the whim of a psychopath who'd happened to see Felix and become obsessed with him. How could he make any sense of the fact that that he'd been raped hundreds of thousands of times, and couldn't even remember most of them? Or... was that a blessing?

"Why are you telling me this?" Felix asked finally, and when Vigo hesitated he laughed: a short, demented noise. Even he could hear the hysteria in it. "I suppose I'm lucky those memories are gone," he said. And then, finally, he began to cry, as he realized the last two Trials would stay with him forever.

"I'm sorry," Vigo said again. "I thought you deserved the truth."

"I want nothing more than to forget that, Vigo." He looked at the laboratory, and all the strange instruments Vigo had collected over the years he'd studied the mysteries of the Entity. "Can you make me forget?"

"Maybe," Vigo said after a long pause. "But anything I try will be dangerous."

Felix was about to say he didn't care about the risks, that he would do anything to forget what he'd just learned, and especially the last two Trials. But then he remembered the moment he and Steve had shared at the campfire. How Steve had saved him the first time. Or... the most recent time, he now knew. Without his memory of Ghostface, he would forget those moments, too. And he wasn't going

to let Ghostface take that from him.

“Never mind, it was a foolish question,” Felix said, making up his mind, trying to push away those horrible memories and focus on more pressing concerns. It was an impossible task, but there were still so many things he had to ask Vigo. One stood out above all the others: “How can we free the others and send us all back to our world?”

“I wish I had a simple answer to that,” Vigo said. “I have learned how to traverse Its realm unseen,” he continued, in a more thoughtful voice. “But It defends Its victims ferociously. Whenever I tried to get to you, my protections began to fail. And without one of you, I was unable to breach the veil and make the journey to your world to warn them of the danger. With you here now, we can follow the breach the Entity used to bring you to its realm, and be in a position to free the others. I can get you back to your life, Felix.”

Felix knew he should feel relief, even elation. This was what he’d been hoping for, what he’d wanted so desperately for years. But escaping and leaving everyone else behind felt hollow, and there was no escaping what he’d endured; it would mark him, indelibly, forever. “There’s no going back to my old life,” he said finally. “Not until we free every one of my friends, and we starve that fucking thing to death.”

For the first time, he saw Vigo smile.

7. Chapter 7

Felix set aside the last of his clothes and entered the shower, testing the water to make sure it was hot. As he started to put shampoo in his freshly-dampened hair, he turned and saw a dark figure outside the glass shower door, a man in red-and-black robes with an uncanny red mask. Felix found he was screaming, but when he opened the door to run he saw it was just a towel and a trick of the steam on the glass shower pane.

Felix closed the door again and collapsed on the tile floor, letting the water hit his closed eyes as he hugged his legs. It had almost been a month since Vigo had managed to bring them back to the real world, Felix's world, and still every morning when Felix awoke in his soft bed he expected to see the light of the campfire beside him and the dark mist beyond. Every morning, he felt that same mix of shame and relief as he realized he wouldn't be forced to endure the Trial, but also that somewhere out there Steve and all of his friends were still trapped in that vicious cycle.

He had to confront the fact that he had left them behind to save himself, and almost every night he dreamed about the suffering they were forced to face. Ghostface was a frequent visitor, and the torture he inflicted upon Steve in them meant Felix awoke in a cold sweat, screaming, more often than not. Sometimes he wondered if the Entity was sending him real visions, or if they were simply nightmares of his own making.

Readjusting to Berlin had been extremely difficult; crowds now gave Felix extreme anxiety, and men in masks sometimes triggered panic attacks that even his new medication couldn't help him with. It didn't help that he had the same body he'd had when he was abducted at 25, though he was now legally 34. Unfortunately, since he had been a fairly notable person in the architecture field prior to being taken, the national press had picked up on his sudden reappearance and run a major story on it.

Felix, with Vigo and his mother's help, had told a half-truth: they told the news that he had been abducted by a human trafficking ring operating near Dyer Island after he accidentally got too close to their

operations, and had only recently escaped. Vigo used the Auris to feed him information about a real group that fit the description, and Felix passed that information to Interpol and other agencies. The press had given him credit for disbanding it, which Felix counted as a small victory. Yet any victory these days felt hollow when the clock was ticking for his entire world. The worst part of this was that it had brought him a lot of undue attention and requests for interviews. He'd made the mistake of agreeing to one of these, which had forced him to relive what Ghostface had done to him, even if only by euphemism and avoidance of the real details so as not to give away their cover.

As he'd expected, he couldn't simply resume his old life. He was lucky though, that Lauren hadn't removed his name from their firm, and he was unsurprised to see it flourishing under her guidance. She welcomed him back with open arms, though they agreed to keep him out of the spotlight until the attention from the media started to die down.

He was devastated to learn Anja, his girlfriend, had died in a car accident three years prior. He hated himself for thinking it, but his first selfish thought when he learned was that she would never know that he hadn't simply abandoned her; he would never be able to explain to her why he'd disappeared. Julia was living with her parents, and they decided together to introduce her slowly to Felix to avoid confusing her and exposing her to the press. They weren't ready to give custody to Felix, and neither was he.

Felix went to Leipzig to see her every weekend now, and called every night, but she was still getting used to him. The first time she called him '*Vati*' was the best thing that had happened to him since his escape. As though the Entity had sensed his happiness, that night he dreamt he found himself in her small yellow room, his eyes closed. "*Eins, zwei, drei, ich komme!*" he called, but when he opened his eyes he saw a dark fog spilling from the closed closet door and opened it just in time to see Julia disappearing into it as Felix once had.

Still, that memory buoyed his spirit when his trauma threatened to overwhelm him. After what Felix had been through there would never be a "normal" again. He would find himself sitting at a drafting table, or working in CAD software, and find himself overcome with a

powerful memory of that place: of Steve, and his friends, being torn apart; of Ghostface's cold hands possessively exploring his body. During the worst of these moments, as the panic threatened to overwhelm him, he would close his eyes and play that memory over and over, telling himself everything he did now, he did for her. Julia was a constant reminder that they needed to succeed.

Slowly, he picked himself up and finished his shower. He left his small hotel room and took the train to the Zoo Leipzig, where he met Julia and Anja's parents. When Julia came up to hug him, he knelt and drew her in tightly. Nothing felt so good as her delicate arms wrapped around his neck. He would do anything to protect her.

"Hallo Vati!" she said into his ear. He smiled.

"I'm so happy to see you," he said back, forcing himself to let her go. He hugged Anja's parents as well, but he thought he could see something like pity in their eyes and it filled him with shame. They never said anything to him about it, but the way they talked to him now was the way someone spoke to the recently bereaved at a wake: they spoke delicately, quietly, as though measuring every word in fear Felix might break. He wished desperately they could go back to when they would joke with him, even tease him, but they didn't see him as Felix anymore; they saw him as the person who was abducted and spent 9 years in captivity and came back broken. They were right of course, he was broken, but it was something of a relief to see them get on another train so he could spend time alone with Julia.

A few hours later, he bought Julia some gelato and they sat together at an uncomfortable picnic table not far from the elephant exhibit. She finished hers within minutes and he laughed when she looked at him, annoyed that he was eating so slowly and keeping her from seeing more of the animals.

"Hurry up!" she said, a childish whine in her voice.

"I'm savoring my food," he said playfully, taking a ridiculously small bite to mess with her.

"*Oma* says you eat so slow because they didn't feed you good food when they took you," she said, and Felix dropped his spoon in shock.

“She... she said what?” Felix felt his face turning white.

“After we had dinner last week,” Julia added, oblivious. “Everyone was done and you had hardly touched your plate! Is that true, Vati?”

Felix sought desperately for something to say. He talked with her grandparents and they’d agreed to be circumspect with the details of Felix’s absence. In practice, that had translated to dancing around the question whenever it came up. He should have known Julia would have a full week to think about it between his visits and would surely be pestering her grandparents for more details.

“I... yes, this month has been the first time I’ve had food like this in a long time,” Felix said quietly. The Entity had never given them food, though how could he explain that? How could he explain that the process of eating now felt strange to him? He decided he would have to be upfront with her. He’d waited long enough; one day he would tell her the full truth, or the relevant parts of it anyway, but for now she deserved an explanation. “I think maybe it’s time I explained to you why I was gone for so long.”

“*Oma* and *Opa* already told me,” she said, though not without some curiosity. “They said some bad people were keeping you from me, and I would understand better when I’m older.” She shook her head slightly, her blonde braid—her hair was the same color as Felix’s—swaying slightly behind her head. “But I’m a big girl! I’m 8 now!”

“You are,” Felix said quickly, a little mirth filling him despite the situation. “And that’s basically true, but I think you should hear it from me.” He took a breath and tried to keep his face steady and emotionless. “The truth is I was... abducted by a... by some bad people. They kept me... locked away from you. For a long time and they... hurt me. And I wanted desperately to come and meet you, to be there for you and your mother as you were growing up, but they wouldn’t let me. Finally, I was able to escape, and seeing you was the first thing I wanted to do.” He didn’t know what else he could tell her. “I wished your *Mutti* were here with us, too,” he added softly.

“*Mutti* told me all the time how much she missed you,” she said quietly, and Felix felt a sharp, stabbing pain at her words. “She said she didn’t know where you were and it made her sad.”

“I’m so sorry, Julia,” was all Felix could say. “I spent every day wishing I could be with you. Wishing I could be home. The details of it I can tell you when you’re older. Your grandparents are right about that.”

“I was mad at you for a long time,” she said bluntly, and Felix felt as if he’d been punched in the chest. “But I know It’s not your fault, *Vati; Oma* and *Opa* explained it to me. I shouldn’t have been mad. And I’m sorry they hurt you.”

“I lost my father when I wasn’t much older than you,” Felix said, “and I was angry for a long time, too. Even though I lost him because he was protecting me.” Her eyes were wide with curiosity. “I don’t blame you for being mad at me. But please know I would have been there for you if I hadn’t been kept away from you.”

“My friend Annika says you were taken by the devil,” she said, and Felix started. Then he remembered the 3-part series some minor British podcast, called “Unsolved Mysteries from Around the World”, had made about him. They had sent him countless emails since his return, but he had ignored all of them. He hadn’t listened to it, but he gathered it had an occult focus that had managed to piece together quite a bit of the truth, including his father’s disappearance, the disturbing history of Dyer Island, Élodie, and even some information about the Imperiatti. He was surprised that that had somehow filtered its way all the way to Julia, but then the podcast had over 3 million followers.

“Well, it certainly felt that way,” Felix said noncommittally. He dreaded the day he would have to explain it to her fully, but he’d kept even the barest details from her for almost a month (at least from his own mouth), and that had been too long. He didn’t want to be the kind of parent who lied to his child, but about this? Maybe sometimes, the lie is better. “But in the end I managed to get away from him, so I could come and see you.” He noticed a small spot of gelato on her cheek and brushed it off with his fingers, and she smiled at him. “*Ich hab’ Dich lieb,*” he added softly, and forced a smile onto his face. “Shall we go see the elephants?”

That night, as he was trimming his beard in his apartment bathroom

back in Berlin, he felt a strange chill suddenly pervade the room. To his growing horror he saw a dark mist gather in the mirror, just like Vigo's Auris. But this was somehow different, and he no longer saw his reflection. Letters formed like a child drawing on a frosted window; they spelled out "Come back to me", and Felix knew exactly what it meant. He took a step back, and then another, until his back was to the wall, and suddenly he saw him: Ghostface, unmasked, his hand reaching out of the mirror as if Felix were drowning and he wanted to offer a hand.

"Fuck. You." Felix's heart raced in terror. He wasn't going back. He couldn't. He'd rather die. Better to die once, than over and over. He pulled the guard off his trimmer and was about to slit his wrists up their length when Ghostface disappeared. The fog started to roll back, but before the normal appearance of the mirror returned photos poured out of the mirror like water through a breached dam. There must have been hundreds, maybe thousands.

Felix didn't dare to look at them until the mirror's reflection returned to his own bone-white face. He'd imagined that, surely. *Please let that be a waking nightmare*. But when he looked down, the photos were still there, covering the floor and the counter in large piles. He reached down, his eyes unfocused, and slowly picked one up. He saw his own naked body, tied spread eagle on his back, gagged, and a thick metal pole held something deep inside his ass. But that wasn't the striking thing about the photo: in large, blocky letters, Ghostface had carved the words "Property of Ghostface" into his chest. The letters were slightly scabbed over, as though they'd healed over days. Felix dropped it and picked up another: this one was of Steve, in a similar position, and it became immediately apparent it was new because the words "Come back to me" were carved into his chest in the same way.

Felix vomited the scant food he'd had at the zoo into the toilet, a panicked sob escaping him. He felt his knees resting on stacks of these photos, and vomited again. With all the dignity he could muster, he got up slowly and left the bathroom, shaking. He'd told Vigo he couldn't return to his normal life. That was true. He spent every night working with Vigo and his parents' old group, the Imperiatti, trying to figure out a way to save Steve and the others. He

hadn't realized he didn't have a choice. The photos proved that.

Felix grabbed a broom and swept the photos into a pile, putting them carefully into some old plastic bins. And if he had really been through hundreds of thousands of Trials (a fact which he still did not want to believe), these were surely only a tiny portion of the photos Ghostface had.

He was careful not to look at them, but he couldn't help but glimpse some of them: he saw himself naked, hanging from his wrists, deep slashes covering his entire body—including his face—so he looked like a perverse white-and-red zebra: some wounds were clearly older and some clearly fresh; he saw himself mummified in some kind of thick leather sack that enveloped his whole body and a hood with blindfold and gag that only allowed him air when Ghostface dictated; he saw himself curled up against Ghostface in a leather straitjacket and muzzle, his ankles bound with coarse black rope, Ghostface's fingers combing his hair; he saw himself and Steve tied so they each had to watch as Ghostface took turns violating them; and so many more, but he did his best to pretend he hadn't. It was proof that Vigo had been telling the truth, and Felix didn't want to confront that fact.

He had the sneaking suspicion that if he burned them, Ghostface would simply send them again, but he would do that as soon as he got home. He took some of his anxiety medication and tried to calm himself. He called Lauren and told her he was going to take the next day off, then immediately walked to the train station as he sent an urgent message on Signal. They had to do something, fast.

Vigo's laboratory was much as it had been in his version of Prague. Felix and his mother had leased the space for him under their names, though Vigo had quickly managed to create an identity for himself and obtain EU citizenship. Felix sat with Vigo, as well as his mother and several members of the Imperiatti, his parents' erstwhile secret society dedicated to understanding and preventing the encroachment of the Entity, though they'd not called it that until Felix's return. The Imperiatti now treated Felix and Vigo as something akin to experts on the subject, which made Felix extremely uncomfortable. Vigo took to the role with vigor.

When Felix explained what had happened, Vigo's face darkened. "Either the Entity is growing considerably stronger in this world than I expected," Vigo said, "Or Ghostface made a very powerful offering to him."

"What would that entail?" Felix asked, somewhat afraid of the answer.

Vigo frowned. "I don't rightly know. The torture would have to be intense."

"So will it happen again? Is my flat now one of those places where the Entity has a foothold?"

"No," Vigo said shortly. "The veil between this world and the Entity's is weakest where great atrocities and suffering have taken place. Elsewhere it is far more difficult to pierce." Felix felt a little relief at that, but if it had happened once, it could happen again.

"What if I'd been close enough for Ghostface to grab? Could he have pulled me through my own mirror back to that Hell?" He saw his mother squirm as he mentioned the masked killer. He hadn't kept anything from her; she knew what it meant if he was taken again.

"I can't deny the possibility," Vigo replied. "The Entity never tried to reclaim me, but Ghostface's... unique interest in you has clearly given it cause to try with you. Remember that that torture was the Entity's best source of nourishment; I suspect that's why it didn't consign you to the Void earlier, and I now believe I was wrong to suggest it would have sent you there had you failed in your escape attempt. It wants you back to feed on you."

"Fucking Hell," Felix breathed, putting his face in his hands. His mother put a hand on his shoulder. He composed himself and looked around the room again at the concerned faces around him. Vigo's was as impassive as always. "But that just means we need to work faster. Are we ready to go forward with the plan?"

"I believe so," Vigo said. "This hasn't been done before, but with enough of my blighted serum, I believe we can weaken its hold on your friends. I can't guarantee that it will be enough, but we have to

try. Once that's done, the Entity will be weakened, but it won't be enough until we manage to repair the veil between this world and its realm in all the places where you were taken. It's the work of generations." He shifted in his seat, an uncharacteristic sign of discomfort from a man as stoic as he. "And Felix, after what you've told us, I think you should sit this out."

"What? Why?" His shock turned to indignation. "They don't even know you; am I not our best chance at convincing them this isn't some trick? What's more, these are *my* people. We've survived together, we've *died* together, been... been gutted and mutilated and... and fucking *raped* hundreds of thousands of times together, even if I only remember the bits and pieces I relive in my nightmares." He set his jaw in defiance. "I want to be there to see them freed. After I just left them there to rot, I *need* to be a part of that."

Vigo's expression didn't change. "And you will be a part of it; you already have been! But sending you into the Entity's realm now would be a mistake. The Entity expended an enormous amount of its power to open that tear in the veil in your flat; sending you there *voluntarily* would be a grave miscalculation on our part."

"Felix," his mother said, "What Vigo is saying makes a lot of sense; I agree with him. It's too dangerous to have you with us. There's a high likelihood that this fails, and we all end up trapped. Your father was taken all that time ago, and then when you were taken I thought my life was over." Her eyes darkened at the memory. "Then I had Julia, and it wasn't everything but it was something to live for. Now I have you back, and call me a selfish parent, but I won't let it happen again."

"It will happen to everyone in this world if we do nothing," one of the other Imperiatti said.

"I am acutely aware of that, Vincent," Vigo cut in coldly. "That possibility will happen much faster if Felix is imprisoned again. You can trust me on that." The other man looked cowed.

"I have no desire to return to that Hell," Felix said quietly after the silence became awkward. "But if I do nothing, I fear I may lose all of

you as well. Just more victims in my nightmares, a sea of faces in the crowd, staring at me in horror and begging me silently to do something to help them. I don't want to see those faces anymore. And I'm the only other person in this room who has seen that place for what it is. Who has managed to escape it."

"I understand how you feel," Vigo said kindly, and Felix could see the truth of that in his eyes. "But there is little you can do. If I cannot succeed with the other people in this room, then it is too late already for this world. And I don't want to see you feeding the Entity again. Not just because your suffering is such powerful nourishment for it, and will bring us closer to the point of no return, but because, believe it or not, I do care what happens to you. Watching through the Auris was hard enough for me. I don't want to make that your reality ever again."

"Very well then," Felix said, deflated. He should probably feel relieved, but instead he felt disappointed. He found himself focused on Vigo's mention of the Auris. He'd been dreading asking this question, but now that he had seen the photos... "Have you been watching them still?" Felix asked tentatively, and Vigo nodded. "Is Steve... are the things I saw in those pictures real?"

Vigo shifted in his seat once more. "I'm afraid so. He is a proxy for you, but the torture is perfunctory now. It's designed to get to you. In truth, from what I'd seen, I'd guessed something like this might happen. I know this doesn't help to say, but he endured far worse when you were there to witness it. When it could push you to new levels of submission. That may change now that the Entity has decided you're worth reclaiming. I think you've already guessed that Ghostface will be planning to use Steve's pain as bait for you. These photos are just the first attempt."

For the millionth time, Felix wondered why he'd been chosen. Why Ghostface had become obsessed with *him*, and not someone else. Why his nightmares would never be free of that uncanny red mask. Why Steve now had to suffer for his sake.

"Then let's not wait any longer," Felix's mother said, steadfast. "We're ready now. We'll make our move tomorrow."

8. Chapter 8

Felix opened his eyes, and Vigo's laboratory was gone. Instead he found himself in a dark woods that looked distressingly familiar: the MacMillan Estate. *No, no, no*, he thought, *this isn't fucking happening!* When his scream echoed back to him from the trees and a disturbed crow flew away, he realized he'd spoken the words aloud. He was no longer wearing the undershirt and athletic pants he remembered putting on before he fell asleep on Vigo's couch, and the scars on his wrists had returned. With growing horror, he felt a dull ache on his chest and questing fingers found the scars that declared his body "Property of Ghostface". He felt a cold weight in his pants that signified the return of the cage Ghostface had put on him in his final Trial.

He wept as a deep panic set in. How had this happened? Why was he back here in this Hell? He pulled his head out of his hands when he heard the rustle of fabric nearby. He was unsurprised to see Ghostface standing over him, though he wasn't wearing his mask.

"Well you fucking won then, psycho," Felix said, fury coloring his voice. He stood up angrily, and the other man immediately grabbed his waist and pulled him in like a long-lost lover. When Felix tried to push him away Ghostface effortlessly pinned his wrists behind his back with one hand, and with the other grabbed his hair roughly and pulled him in for a kiss. Felix bit his lip, but that just excited Ghostface, and Felix felt his attacker's dick grow hard against his own in its cage.

Felix couldn't stop the other man's tongue from invading his mouth, and finally just let it happen. Ghostface twisted his wrists painfully until he fully reciprocated and leaned into the kiss, disgusted with himself. Ghostface's kiss was greedy and somehow he managed to make it feel possessive, as if he wanted to communicate clearly it was about his pleasure and not Felix's.

Then, without warning, he used his foot on the back of Felix's knees and brought him to the ground, got behind him in one fluid motion and pushed his head into the dirt. Before Felix could even process it his jacket, shirt, and pants were gone with a few quick slashes of the

knife. Felix tried to crawl away while his arms were free but Ghostface had him completely under control. It was a feeling Felix remembered well; the other man didn't even need the restraints he usually used to keep Felix helpless.

"I've missed this," a harsh voice said in his ear, and he realized with disgust it was the first time he'd heard Ghostface speak. Or the first time that he could remember, anyway. "I've missed owning every part of your body. You missed this, didn't you, you filthy little slut?" Ghostface teased as he bound Felix's hands behind his back. Felix thrashed, but Ghostface's grasp was iron and there was nowhere for him to go.

"I savored every moment away from you, you freak," he said through gritted teeth. "Go fuck yourself!" Ghostface gagged him then, so his next choice expletives were nothing but muffled grunts. This didn't anger his attacker though; Ghostface's excitement was clear against Felix's lower back. And before he had even a moment to process what was happening, Ghostface had picked him up at the waist so his head was still in the dirt but his ass was exposed in the air. Ghostface pulled aside his robe then and started inching slowly inside him as Felix moaned. Then, seemingly all at once, Ghostface was inside him fully, and Felix could feel his navel and balls against his ass. Felix cried out as much as he could through the gag. This wasn't happening. Not again. But the pain was real, and the fullness of it was overwhelming. He felt a pain in his chastity cage as the involuntary pleasure of his prostate being stimulated made him start to swell, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Ghostface sighed contentedly, and Felix felt tears spilling from his eyes once more. Then Ghostface grabbed his hair and pulled his head up so his neck was straining. While still inside him, he spoke softly in Felix's ears. "Don't lie to me, boy. You missed this. You missed having me inside you. You don't feel complete without me. You've told me so yourself, so, so many times. Like any boy, you just need to learn some manners. I love that part: breaking you in, teaching you your place. And I've so missed being inside you. I've missed using you like you deserve. You're mine." Felix tried to protest, but it was hard to show defiance through a gag. Ghostface chuckled darkly at his muffled grunts, a harsh, grating sound. "Listen to you. You're

pathetic. Soon you'll be begging for this again."

Felix whimpered, and that excited Ghostface even more. He started to thrust, still holding Felix's hair tightly, and as before he didn't stop when he came the first time, or the second, and so on until Felix thought he would be injured permanently. Something about this place made him resilient enough to endure it, despite the pain, just as it made Ghostface able to keep going.

Finally, after an eternity, Ghostface seemed spent, and hoisted Felix over his shoulder like a fireman. He brought Felix to the killer shack, and Felix was surprised to see a rough wooden double bed instead of the normal hooks when Ghostface took him into the basement. Ghostface laid him gently on it and covered his naked body with the rough linen blanket, though he left his hands bound. He disrobed himself and lay next to Felix, staring into his eyes and bringing him close like a lover so their chests were almost touching. Felix met his gaze and tried to speak, and Ghostface finally removed his gag.

Felix let his anger subside and decided to ask outright after a long time. "How did I get here?"

"You're not here," Ghostface said, and he sounded disappointed. "But you're my property, boy. I own your dreams now. I'll own the rest of you again soon."

Felix cried out in relief. "Then this is just another nightmare!" But as he said it he knew this was something more. It was far more lucid than any nightmare the Entity had visited upon him in the past, in a way dreams simply were not. He tried to sit up, but Ghostface pulled him back in with a quick punch to the gut. When the pain didn't make him wake up, Felix felt some of his fear return.

"Get back here," Ghostface said darkly, and then got on top of Felix, kissing him again roughly so that his head was pushed hard into the threadbare pillow. Felix kissed him back, knowing the consequences if he didn't. *This is a dream, Felix. Wake the fuck up!* But he was still pinned under Ghostface, the other man's tongue invading his mouth in a display of ersatz intimacy, though Ghostface surely saw it as genuine affection for his... his slave. Felix felt bile in his throat as he thought of himself that way again.

Then, abruptly, Ghostface pulled away, staring into the distance as though he'd suddenly been called away. Without a word, he disappeared, and the basement and the trappings of the MacMillan Estate dissolved with him, so Felix found himself in a bed in the raw fog, spidery legs twitching feebly throughout it. He started screaming, and then the world shifted once more and he felt his eyes open for real.

"Felix!" a voice was saying, and though it was intimately familiar to him he took a moment to place it. It was Steve's voice, and he realized he was still on Vigo's couch, his hair tousled, and Steve was kneeling beside him, tears of joy in his eyes. Felix sat up and before he could say anything Steve had wrapped him in a hug, and it was as if the nightmare never happened.

"Steve," Felix found himself choking on the words. "I'm so sorry I left you in that place. That he was doing those things to you *because* I left."

"You did exactly as I asked," Steve said, his head still on Felix's shoulder. He pulled back slightly so he could look Felix in the eye. "I was afraid you were gone, that you were somewhere worse, or nowhere. When I saw him again, I felt so fucking happy, Felix, because I knew you had made it out."

"Did everyone make it?"

"Everyone," Steve said, and his smile was broader than Felix had ever seen. "They're downstairs. Vigo's plan worked better than even he expected. There's still a lot to do, but for now we're all safe. Our world is safe."

Felix felt flushed, adrenaline coursing through him, and without even thinking about it he brought Steve in for a kiss. Steve eagerly kissed him back. Unlike Ghostface, Steve was warm and tender, and Felix felt like he was becoming more of himself in his arms, and not losing himself piece by piece. He pulled up the blanket, and Steve lay next to him on the couch, his face resting next to Felix's heart. Felix wrapped an arm around him, and realized nothing could be better than this moment. It was more than he'd ever dared to hope for when he'd been imprisoned.

“What do we do now?” Steve said.

“Whatever the fuck we want.” Felix smiled mischievously, tracing the curve of Steve’s collarbone with his finger. “I say we order in and celebrate all night while we have everyone here, German style. That is: copious amounts of beer.”

“Are we in Germany?” Felix was surprised at the question.

“Yes, we’re in Berlin right now. Unfortunately, there are many places here where the veil was weak. It was the ideal place to stage Vigo’s plan.”

“This is very new to me,” Steve said hesitantly. “It was 1986 when I came to the Entity’s realm... Vigo told me it’s 2030 now. I can’t even begin to make sense of that. I’ve only briefly seen this world but it’s very different from the one I knew. I’m glad to be home but I should be... 64 right now. Yet I still have my 20-year-old body. It’s different for you: you still had a life to come back to, a world that you understand. But this is all very confusing to me. How many of my family members, my friends, are gone already? How can I ever explain this to the ones who are left?”

Felix found Steve’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “You went through a lot together before you were taken. They’ve seen some very strange things. This can’t be any stranger. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“If they’re even alive,” Steve said, and he started to cry, so Felix held him quietly for a long time until he calmed down a little.

“I’m sorry, Steve. We needed an anchor point to bring you all back at once. Finding the place where each of you was taken would’ve taken too much time and been too risky.”

“Vigo explained it to me already,” Steve said, but Felix knew the explanation wasn’t enough. He was free of the Entity’s torture, but he wasn’t home. Not really. “It’s just something I’ll have to learn to deal with.”

“I’ll be here to help you in whatever way I can,” Felix said, and

suddenly he couldn't bear not to tell him. "And I wanted to surprise you with this, but the first week I was back I was able to track down at least one person you told me about. Robin lives in Chicago now with her wife. She's a linguistics professor at Northwestern. I'll go with you to see her when you're ready."

Felix felt Steve's arms tighten around his waist, and he saw a flush of relief cross his face at the knowledge that something familiar, someone from his old life, was still there for him when he was ready. "I'd like that," he said, and then, "Did you say 'her wife'? Two women can get married now?"

"Yes, any two consenting adults can marry now. In Chicago, in Hawkins, and here in Germany and most of the EU. Things are very different now."

"You know, she'd think this is really funny," Steve was practically laughing to himself.

"What?"

"That I'm... I don't know what to call it. I don't know what you want to call it. But after everything she tried to do for me back before I was taken, all those girls she set me up with, she's going to laugh when she finds out I'm... dating you." He said the last words hesitantly, as if they were a question. Felix smiled at him and kissed him again, and it was somehow even sweeter than the first time.

"Oh, we're dating, are we?" He kissed Steve's neck, and with one finger he traced the curve of Steve's back.

"Is that not... aren't we? I... I want to, if you do. I don't really understand it yet, but I want to." He let out a small, involuntary moan at Felix's touch, and Felix felt a thrill of excitement he thought he'd never feel again after everything that he'd been through.

"I do too," Felix said, smiling, and moved his head so his chin rested just above Steve's head. This was the intimacy Ghostface thought he had with Felix, but he was wrong. This was so much better; Ghostface could only take it by force, whereas with Steve it felt as natural as breathing. *Don't fucking think about him.* "One day, I'll

introduce you to my daughter. She'll like you." Felix laughed at the thought, and all the stories Steve had told him about the kids he'd protected in Hawkins.

"And... your girlfriend?"

"She passed away in a car accident while I was in the Entity's realm. Julia has been living with her parents ever since."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too. She was one of the funniest people I've ever met. She spent so much of her life trying to help people. You remind me a lot of her, actually." He ran a hand through Steve's hair, and Steve squirmed slightly at his touch.

They lay together quietly for some time, just savoring the moment. They'd been through so much death together, so much pain. This was not something they'd ever dared to hope for.

"You know, you were screaming in your sleep," Steve said suddenly, and the memory of his dream—or whatever it had been—came back to his mind like a discordant note in a beautiful symphony. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I..." Felix didn't want to lie to Steve. He considered it, if only to avoid ruining the moment, but he couldn't do it. "Ghostface came to me in my dream. Or, rather, my nightmare."

"I'm sorry, Felix," Steve said, and Felix knew he didn't understand yet. "I think he'll be in our nightmares for the rest of our lives."

"No, it wasn't just a nightmare. I've had those too, of course. This was... different. More than just a dream, even a lucid one. It was like I was really there. And he told me... he told me he 'owns my dreams now'. He said he'll 'own the rest of me again soon'."

Steve was looking at him with genuine concern now. "But that was before Vigo freed us. Maybe without us, they won't be able to visit your dreams, much less take you again. Actually, fuck that, I won't let them take you again. Not after all we've been through to get here."

Felix wasn't sure it would be that easy. There was a surety in Ghostface's words. Being visited by him in his dreams was bad enough, but at least in his waking hours he could be free. Actually being taken again... he would kill himself before that happened.

"I see you've had your reunion," a bemused voice said from the door, and Steve sat up quickly, his face reddening. It was Vigo.

"It was clever of you to leave before I woke up," Felix replied as he sat up as well.

"I had an inkling you were planning to come with us anyway. So I slipped a little sedative into your drink last night. I have to beg your forgiveness for that, but I believed it was necessary." Was that why he had such a hard time waking up from his nightmare?

"Well, it worked a little better than you intended." When Felix explained his dream, Vigo's face twisted with concern. It was not a comforting sight.

"He actually said that? That he 'owns your dreams now'?"

"It's ingrained in my memory, Vigo, as if it really happened. I still feel...a phantom soreness, as if he really... did that to me. It was so unlike a dream."

"Without its victims, the Entity may be unable to recreate that projection into your mind. Its ties to this world are far weaker now. Today was a great victory, but... the Entity is strong in its own right, and yours is far from the first world it has visited, as you know. I can't guarantee it was enough to keep you safe. I can give you something to increase your mental defenses. And we will keep working to strengthen the veil wherever we can in this world, to deny the Entity further purchase."

Felix nodded, but he had a lingering suspicion this wasn't over for him. But all he could do was trust that their victory today was enough to forestall the Entity. When Steve squeezed his hand, he smiled at him, and counted himself lucky to have met him, even though it had cost him so much. He couldn't be sure they were safe, but for now, they had each other, and all their friends back, and that

was enough.

9. Chapter 9

“Steve, I brought sushi,” Felix called out as he closed and locked the door of their apartment behind him.

“Gross!” he heard Steve call back, and Felix chuckled.

“Just kidding, I brought some sandwiches from the French place you like.”

“Thank God, I’m starving,” Steve said as he emerged from the little study space he’d made for himself in the den. After a few months, Steve had settled into a comfortable routine in Berlin. With Vigo’s help and some of the Imperiatti’s connections, they’d created him a new identity with the same name (as he couldn’t reasonably pass for a 64-year-old), given him American citizenship and gotten him residency status in Germany on a student visa so he could study at the *Freie Universität Berlin* while staying with Felix. The jump to living together would have been too soon in an ordinary relationship, but for them it was only natural. In a way, they’d lived together for many years already in the Entity’s realm, where time did not work in a way they understood.

The decision to stay in Berlin had been a difficult one for Steve, but Felix couldn’t leave his daughter, or his architecture firm, and, though he was reluctant to admit it to Felix, Steve was hesitant to go back and see for himself how much had changed. Felix knew he was scared to see how many of his friends were gone, or simply no longer remembered him. This weekend they were flying to Chicago to see Robin. It was a short drive in a rental car to Hawkins from there, though Felix wasn’t sure Steve would want to make the trip.

In truth, Felix was worried Steve was hiding with him, afraid to face the reality of the situation back in America. Nancy was there now, and she called Steve almost every night. They always spoke in hushed voices, as though they were sharing a grave secret, which, Felix supposed, they were. Whatever they discussed, Steve always seemed somber afterward. But Felix knew he would need to face it sooner rather than later. He’d decided to let Steve come to terms with it in his own time.

Nonetheless, Steve seemed to be taking well to their new life together in Germany, even if he was still very much an outsider. His German was still barely passable, at least to Felix's ears, but luckily the courses he was taking were in English. It was more than just culture shock and a language barrier though; he was from a different time, and even in Hawkins, everything would be different for him.

Before Felix opened the bag at the breakfast counter, he brought Steve in for a quick kiss, and he felt that same heat spreading in his chest that he always felt when he kissed Steve.

“I love kissing you,” Felix murmured into Steve’s mouth.

“I love kissing you too.” Steve said, smiling. “But I’m starving. Let’s grab some beers and eat before I pass out.”

“You know you could cook for yourself,” Felix teased. “You wouldn’t be so hungry by the time I got home.”

“And miss all of that weird German shit you make? I wouldn’t dream of it!”

“I’m sorry, did you just say, ‘weird German shit’?”

“I mean, ‘your lovely regional cuisine.’”

“It’s Bavarian, asshole,” but Felix was laughing as he said it. He grabbed a few bottles from the fridge and when he closed it, his gaze landed on the picture hanging on the front: everyone who had escaped the Entity, together at the bar, an odd mix of people from all over the world; each had the same deliriously happy smile on their face. Zarina, Nancy, Cheryl, and Élodie were in the forefront with everyone else arrayed around them. He spotted Steve beaming at the camera in the background, his own arm wrapped around him, a few drops of beer spilling from the *Stein* in his hand. They’d scattered around the world again, but what they’d been through had given them a shared experience and a fierce loyalty to one another. Every last one of them wanted to continue the fight against the Entity, which was far from over, so they were all still in close contact.

As they ate on the balcony, the Berlin skyline unfolding before them,

Steve told him a story about one of his friends at university, and Felix was struck, as he was almost every day, by how perfect his life was now. It was as if the universe had decided to balance the horrific torture he'd endured with his own personal Heaven on Earth. He'd had only a few nightmares about Ghostface in the past few weeks, and he hadn't experienced any more lucid dreams. Anja's parents, at Julia's request and mutual agreement with Felix, were transferring custody to him in a few weeks. He and Steve had spent the better part of a weekend repainting, decorating, and furnishing the spare bedroom for her and were excited to surprise her with what they'd put together (the room had a space theme, as she had decided she wanted to be an astronomer one day).

When they were done eating, Steve took hold of Felix's hand and they just quietly enjoyed the evening air, fragrant with the smell of the trattoria across the street and the greenway that ran down the center of the road. The sounds of laughter and loud conversation were starting to pick up from the pub a few blocks down. Felix thought it was a beautiful night.

This simple pleasure was unimaginable just a few months ago, when they were both forced to face the life-and-death nature of the Trials. Felix still hadn't gotten used to the banality of his life now; he counted even the simplest things, like buying a morning coffee on the way to work, or doing a shot of tequila with Steve and their friends, or even taking a hot shower, as a treasured moment.

Steve surprised Felix from his musings when he stood up suddenly and pulled Felix with him, so they stood together against the railing. Steve kissed him again, more deeply this time, his hands starting at the nape of Felix's neck and slowly, softly, moving their way down his back. As if by instinct, Felix felt one of his hands move into the back of Steve's hair, wonderfully soft from his conditioner, while his other rested on his boyfriend's lower back.

As Steve's hands finally moved to Felix's ass, he squeezed gently and Felix moaned into Steve's mouth. Felix blushed when he heard whooping from the street below, and they moved away from the railing and opened the French doors to the living room, but didn't break apart. Steve was guiding him now, pulling his hand into the bedroom.

“You planned this out, didn’t you?” Felix teased, as Steve started unbuttoning his dress shirt.

“What else do you think I’m thinking about at uni all day?” Steve said, as he undid Felix’s belt hungrily. Felix’s fingers clumsily reciprocated—something about Steve made him as giddy and nervous as he had been as a 16-year-old—but Steve was faster, and he was throwing Felix’s clothes aside with rapid abandon. Finally, Felix was wearing nothing but his briefs, and then Steve pushed him on the bed roughly. One of Felix’s favorite parts about sex with Steve was that sometimes he wanted to take charge, and sometimes he wanted Felix to. Tonight seemed to be the former.

Steve’s pants were still on, and Felix leaned forward to rectify that. Steve stepped out of them neatly as they fell to the floor and he kicked them aside eagerly. Felix’s hands moved to Steve’s ass, pulled him down slightly, and with his mouth he gently kissed Steve’s neck, and then his collarbone, and then his pecs... Steve moaned slightly at the touch of his lips and Felix felt himself getting harder and harder. His mouth continued down Steve’s chest as one hand moved to play with his nipple. With his other, he gently massaged Steve’s ass, then his thigh, and then both hands moved to caress Steve’s hard cock outlined so beautifully in his briefs.

Steve’s head was fully craned back now, his eyes closed and his fingers gently digging into Felix’s shoulders; Felix took pride in being able to elicit the reaction. Steve was tired of the teasing and quickly removed his briefs; his dick shook, as if with anticipation, as it emerged from its nylon prison.

“Such an eager guy,” Felix said as he continued to kiss Steve’s chest; his lips had reached Steve’s navel. His left hand squeezed Steve’s ass as his right played gently with Steve’s balls.

“Please,” was all Steve could say, “Oh, fuck, please.”

Felix smiled, rubbing his lips against the tip, and then running his tongue down its length. Steve’s hands shot with rocket speed to the back of Felix’s head and buried themselves in his hair. The first time they’d done this, Felix had panicked when he’d remembered how Ghostface had done the same thing to him. With time, he’d learned to

give himself to the pleasure of the moment, and now he eagerly accepted Steve into his mouth. Steve's hands weren't forceful, and Felix felt excited at the prospect of pleasing his boyfriend. Steve moaned, and Felix started to move faster, using more of his tongue. He pulled back for a moment, and Steve whimpered, but he moaned all the louder when Felix resumed.

"Fuck... fuck! I'm already gonna come," Steve said, his voice husky.

Felix didn't stop; he was ready for that. But Steve pulled out and pushed Felix onto his back on the bed. Felix lay there, propped on his elbows, waiting to see what Steve wanted to do. Steve was panting, his face flushed. His cock was still wet with Felix's saliva, and harder than ever. He was so close, and his naked body was so beautiful. He grabbed two pillows and gave one to Felix to put under his head. He kissed him then, pushing Felix's head down into the pillow with gentle force. Felix was so focused on the taste of him, the warmth and softness of his lips, that he hardly noticed as Steve removed his briefs.

Steve's mouth moved down, and he kissed Felix's neck tenderly. Felix closed his eyes and heard himself moaning without meaning to; Steve knew how much that turned him on. Steve worked down his chest as he had and reciprocated with his mouth, and within minutes Felix was on the brink as well.

"Steve, holy fuck, I'm-I'm really close," Felix gasped as Steve's tongue played with him and he almost came right then and there, but Steve knew to stop just in time. Steve grabbed the other pillow then and put it under Felix's lower back, and Felix was glad he'd prepared this morning in the shower, because Steve was already grabbing lube and a condom from the nightstand.

"I really want to fuck you," Steve said.

"Well, what the Hell are you waiting for?" Felix said, still breathless and on the edge. It was the right thing to say. Steve grabbed his legs and exposed him, and then before Felix could say anything Steve was probing him with one finger, then two, slowly opening him up. When Felix was ready, he slowly entered. Felix opened his eyes for a moment, and met Steve's, filled with lust, but love, too. He wanted

Felix to enjoy it, and that was written all over his face. Felix bit his lip, and then Steve was thrusting in earnest and the pleasure and the fullness of it made him cry out in ecstasy.

“Y-you’re so fucking hot,” Steve said, his hands squeezing Felix’s thighs. “I love you,” he added, and he leaned forward to kiss Felix then as he was still inside him. It was a moment of pure bliss.

“I...love...you...too, and I-I...fuck...” Felix gasped, but he couldn’t say anything else intelligible as Steve hit his prostate in just the right way. Felix came then without needing to stimulate himself, and the look of ecstasy, or his moan, must have put Steve over the edge as well because Felix felt Steve come inside him.

After, Steve collapsed next to him. Felix grabbed a towel from the nightstand and cleaned his chest and the rest of his body and Steve’s the best he could. Steve snuggled against him and rested his head against Felix’s pec, close enough to hear his heartbeat. Felix knew from experience Steve might well fall asleep in that position, and Felix was content to let him. He gently ran his hand through Steve’s hair and realized his boyfriend was already snoring softly. How had he fallen so madly in love?

Felix smiled at the ceiling, thinking about the ring he’d bought just a few days before. He couldn’t wait to see Steve wearing it.

Danny Johnson took a sip of his morning coffee. It’d been a week since he’d found out how to escape the Entity’s realm and set himself up in this abandoned warehouse. That place held no pleasure for him without survivors to torture. The Entity had whispered that he would be given new playthings, even a new boy, but Danny didn’t want to wait. Unlike many of the others, who’d been tortured over endless years to become the Entity’s instruments, he’d come to the realm voluntarily. Danny didn’t like situations in which he was not in control, and he was tired of being forced to wait for the Entity to find new playthings.

More importantly, he wanted his boy back.

He looked at the pictures he’d taken the night before, of his boy on a

balcony. The scum who lived with him was kissing him. He knew they'd fucked afterward—he'd managed to take a photo of that as well from the neighboring rooftop—and it filled him with rage.

His finger grazed his boy's blond hair in the photo, and sighed, remembering how good it felt to pull it when he forced his boy onto his cock to service it as he was meant to do. He was preparing a space for his boy in the basement; the preparations were much harder here than in the Entity's realm: he didn't have the supernatural power granted to him by the Entity any longer, the materials—soundproofing, restraints, training implements, and the like—were harder to obtain, and the risks were much higher. But Danny was patient, and the added difficulty excited him.

Soon, his boy would be back with him again.

10. Chapter 10

Steve sipped his wine, secretly admiring the perfect wave of his boyfriend's hair. Felix was telling him a story about work as they ate lunch at the little trattoria across the street from Felix's apartment. It was raining—Felix had called it “a beautiful Berlin Saturday”—but an awning covered the small bistro tables, and heat lamps kept the air pleasant. Julia was on a weekend camping trip with her grandparents; Steve knew Felix had declined their offer to come because of the way they treated him now.

“I’m really happy with how the design is coming so far,” Felix was saying, “but I still have to—”

Click.

Steve saw Felix’s pupils dilate and he heard him start to hyperventilate. Steve cursed inwardly as he realized it was a woman at a nearby table taking a picture with her friend. He took Felix’s hands in his. “It’s okay,” he said, “just breathe. You’re safe. It was just that woman taking a selfie.” But it wasn’t working. “Hey, look at me. Focus on me.” Felix looked at him, but there was something in his eyes that told Steve his mind was trapped in his nightmarish past. “Tell me about the Baroque period of architecture.”

“I... what?”

“Please. Just tell me.” Steve feigned an urgency in his voice.

“Uh, I... Baroque architecture dates back to Italy in the 17th century, and was mainly influenced by-by the Catholic Church.” Steve heard the slight tremor in his voice, but he knew he was successfully distracting him. “Bernini’s colonnade at St. Peter’s Basilica and the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles are some very famous... very famous exemplars.”

“What about Raccaca?”

“Rococo.” Steve saw the tips of his boyfriend’s lips curl ever so slightly in a smile, and he counted that as a win.

“Right, that. Tell me about that.”

“I know what you’re trying to do.” Steve could hear that his breathing had steadied somewhat.

“I’m not really being subtle about it,” Steve laughed.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too. Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Felix said, and he squeezed Steve’s hand reassuringly. “I’m sorry. Something so mundane shouldn’t set me over the edge like that.” Steve felt anger rising in him, not at Felix, but at that psychopath who had hurt the man he loved so deeply; it broke his heart that Felix was actually apologizing as if it was his fault.

“Don’t apologize,” Steve said. He wished he could take away that pain for Felix, make him forget, but he couldn’t. “You’ve been having more of these panic attacks lately, haven’t you?”

Felix nodded. “I don’t know why, but I can’t shake the feeling that he’s watching me. That he’s...that he’s *out* there somewhere, biding his time. I didn’t feel this way when I first escaped, or in the few months afterward, when I got you back. I don’t know why I feel this way now. Sometimes...” Steve saw Felix glance around them, as if looking for a hidden sniper. “Sometimes I swear I can see him on a rooftop or in a window, and I know that’s nuts, but... it feels real, and whenever I look back at that spot he’s gone.” Steve was growing more concerned now. What if Felix was right? What if Ghostface had escaped the realm, as they had, and was now really stalking Felix? He couldn’t say that he’d noticed anything out of the ordinary, but then, Ghostface had never been obsessed with *him*.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Steve said, and he meant it, but as he said it he didn’t know how he could.

That night, Felix waited at the corner by the café where Steve’s text said to meet him after his study group session ended. They were supposed to go to the *Kino* together, but Steve wasn’t usually this

late. He checked his watch; it was already 15 minutes past when Steve said he would meet him, and the empty street was starting to unnerve him. The café had just closed early, apparently, and the rest of the buildings on the street were residential. Why would Steve ask him to meet him here, after the café had closed?

Then all the hairs on the back of his neck stood up all at once, and he somehow *felt* that someone was watching him. He turned, and he broke into a cold sweat as he saw him in the small alley next to the café: Ghostface, wearing his mask and robes, a long hunting knife in his hand.

No. No. That can't be...

Felix blinked but the man didn't disappear; when he started walking toward him, Felix felt a great sinking horror at the realization that he hadn't been imagining it. He wasn't just paranoid. Ghostface *had* been stalking him these last few weeks... and he wanted Felix back under his control.

Felix sprinted as fast as he could in the direction of a more populated street, his heartbeat racing in terror. The rain was still falling, and Felix heard a small splash with every step; behind him, he heard Ghostface tracking, slowly gaining on him, but he didn't dare to look back.

Then, like a gift from the universe, he rounded the corner and there were two men next to a police car, their uniforms announcing "POLIZEI".

"Please," Felix called out desperately, "help me!"

The men looked at him, startled, as Felix almost ran into them headfirst. "Sir, what's wrong?" one of them asked.

"That man is chasing me," Felix said, pointing behind him, but then he saw that there was no one there.

"Who?"

"He... he was right behind me," Felix was out of breath. One of them checked the area, his hand on his weapon, but he came back shortly

and shrugged.

"This area seems pretty deserted, except for us," one of the cops said.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" the other cop said, and then recognition dawned on him. "You're that architect that was abducted, aren't you? I saw you on the news."

Felix nodded, not sure what else to say. "The person chasing me was... one of my captors."

The men were looking at him with something like pity, and concern, but Felix couldn't bring himself to feel angry as he normally would; clearly they thought he was having some kind of traumatic episode. *Had they scared him off? Had he really just imagined it?*

"Hey man," one of the cops said, "I'm really sorry. Let's get you home, yeah?"

"I... but he was... I swear I *saw* him and h-he..." Felix suddenly felt ashamed; he felt the blood rush to his cheeks. *Had* he imagined it? "Y-yeah, if you wouldn't mind. Thank you for...for understanding." He saw in the reflection of the police car's window that he was pale as death and he could hear his own frantic breathing. He tried to calm down; how had his imagination run so wild? It must have been a waking nightmare. Nothing else made sense. The Entity would never let Ghostface go...

One of the cops opened the door for him, and as the other took one last look around, Felix saw a dark figure come up behind him. He tried to call out, but it was too late, Ghostface drew the hunting knife cruelly across his throat, cutting him to the bone; the other officer turned and drew his gun in one fluid motion, and for one shining moment Felix thought that would be the end of it. But Ghostface was too close, and before the man could shoot Ghostface had disarmed him. In a flash, the officer was on the ground and Ghostface was on top of him, trying to drive home the knife. They fought briefly, struggling for control.

Felix climbed out of the car to help and grabbed Ghostface from behind, trying to pull him off, but the other man elbowed him in the

face and stunned him briefly. That was enough to give the officer more leverage, though, and he managed to push Ghostface off him. Felix reached for the gun but Ghostface kicked it out of reach and then kicked Felix square in the chest so he flew backward painfully into the police car.

The officer was on his feet now, and managed to call quickly for backup in his radio. Felix heard Ghostface hiss in frustration, and he thought maybe the two of them had a chance against him, since he was now without the Entity's supernatural gifts. He was wrong. Ghostface advanced quickly and sidestepped Felix's swing, using his momentum against him effortlessly so he hit the ground, hard, on his chest. The officer came in at almost the same time, and Felix was too dazed to see what happened, but in a flash the knife was in the officer's heart and the man was crumbling to the ground.

"You managed to make this very messy," Ghostface whispered into his ear where he lay prone.

"G-get away from me," Felix gasped as he tried to crawl. "T-this can't be real. No no no no no no no..."

"It's real, boy," Ghostface said smugly, "and soon you'll be glad to be back with me. Back where you belong." Felix whimpered in fear before he could stop himself, and Ghostface let out a disgustingly aroused sigh.

Ghostface's hands were on him then, grabbing his wrists and binding them tightly behind his back. Felix tried to fight back but everything was still spinning and even in the real world, Ghostface was very strong. He hefted Felix over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, and Felix was reminded painfully of being taken to the hook. He struggled, but Ghostface carried him bodily back into the alley, where Felix now saw a dark panel van waited.

He was screaming for help now; he saw a man walking his dog round the corner, stop, and call after them angrily. Ghostface brandished his knife warningly, and the man visibly took a step back, his dog whimpering as if it recognized the danger this man presented. "NO!" Felix screamed as Ghostface dropped him unceremoniously in the back of the van and locked a collar on him that was attached via a

short chain to a fixed metal ring on the floor.

Felix heard sirens in the distance, and screamed for help again, but Ghostface had produced a simple ball gag that went quickly into his mouth and muffled his shouts. He felt a prick in his neck then, and within moments a dark curtain descended over everything, and his consciousness faded.

Steve wrung his hands; he felt so helpless. He sat in the waiting room at the police station. A junior detective named Annika was there keeping him company, but in reality they were just sitting together in silence. The TV in the corner was showing a news segment about Felix and the murder of the two police officers. Some nearby home with a surveillance camera had captured the entire altercation, as well as Ghostface running after him down the street. With the phone Felix had bought him for his birthday, he translated any words he didn't understand in the broadcast.

"...and then murdered the two policemen," the reporter was saying, "whose names have not yet been released out of respect for their families. Mr. Richter was subdued in the altercation and abducted. Dashcam video of the incident indicates that Richter identified the masked assailant to the two officers as one of the men who abducted him previously from Dyer Island and held him captive for 9 years as we have previously reported.

"Reports from sources close to Richter suggest this man had an unhealthy obsession for the young architect, and was his primary abuser during his long captivity. He was reportedly extremely angry that Richter escaped several months ago, and may have been stalking Richter for weeks here in Berlin in an attempt to recapture him. An eyewitness saw Richter being restrained and loaded into a black panel van, and was able to give a partial license plate to the police, as seen in this photo. If anyone has any information, they are asked to report it to the tip line shown at the bottom of your screen. Thank you."

Steve grew irritated as the story changed to something more mundane about some political matter in the *Bundestag*. Was that all Felix was to them? Some two-minute segment, and then onto the next

thing? He knew it was irrational, but it pissed him off all the same. Annika seemed to notice.

“We’re doing all we can to find him,” she said, and Steve believed her. But he also knew he was being handled, and that pissed him off, too.

“You have a partial plate on the van. Why isn’t that enough? Surely someone must have found it by now. Where it’s registered or whatever-whatever the fuck.”

“The van was stolen,” Annika said in an infuriatingly calm voice that was close to being patronizing. “We’re on the lookout for it but for now that’s all we can do. Felix’s abductor—the one you call Ghostface—almost certainly knows that the van has been made.”

“So I just wait for you to have a better lead?”

“We’re pursuing every lead that we can, Mr. Harrington. Trust us.” So far, that was hard to believe. All they’d really discovered so far was that Ghostface had somehow hacked Steve’s phone (or Felix’s, or both), to send him the text that had lured him to the café.

“You don’t understand,” Steve said bitterly. “He was trying to tell me this morning that he felt like he was being stalked.” Steve felt shame growing in him; how could he not blame himself? “I thought... I thought it was just because of his anxiety.”

“You couldn’t have known,” she said, though he thought he heard a note of judgement in her voice. He didn’t blame her. She was right.

“He even told me he’d been seeing him in windows and on rooftops, and that this was escalating. What kind of partner am I if I can just dismiss that?”

“He *has* had trouble with panic attacks and anxiety,” she said. “And he has extreme PTSD. An exaggerated fear response is only natural as he starts to process all the horrible things that happened to him.”

“Do you know what they did to him?”

“I know enough,” she said uncomfortably, squirming in her seat. “The

photo you gave us was... extremely disturbing." Steve had found a photo weeks ago while cleaning under the sink in the bathroom; he hadn't told Felix, but it had been missed when he'd burned the originals Ghostface had sent through the mirror.

It showed Felix unconscious, his hands chained above him and his legs spread apart and shackled to the ground so he could hardly move. He hung limply in his bonds, his head lolling to the side and his eyes mercifully closed. Vicious whip marks covered his entire back and torso; they were the kinds of wounds that would have left severe scarring in the real world. Ghostface had taken a maskless selfie next to his work as if Felix's body was a canvas for him. He held a padded blindfold, but no gag, in the arm wrapped around Felix's naked shoulder. Steve had spent too long thinking about why and he'd realized it was because he didn't want Felix to know when the whip was going to fall, but he did want to hear him scream. He wasn't sure why he'd kept the photo, but he was glad he did, because now the police at least knew his real face.

Steve had never wanted to kill someone before, but now it was all he thought about. He'd found it difficult to concentrate in his classes since that day in the bathroom because his mind kept drifting to that photo and the primal anger it raised in him. That that man was now walking the streets of Berlin, that he had actually managed to kidnap Felix again... it was too much. The police would do what they could, but Steve was already beginning to expect that they would never find Felix. At least, not before it was too late. He needed Vigo. He needed to take matters into his own hands... and he wanted to be the one to stop Ghostface from ever hurting Felix again.

11. Chapter 11

Felix awoke slowly, expecting to see Steve next to him in bed. When he realized he couldn't see anything because his head was covered in a thick leather hood with a built-in gag, he remembered what had happened. His entire body was cocooned in something like a sleeping bag, but made of leather, and impossibly tight around his body so his arms were trapped helplessly at his sides and his legs were rendered completely immobile. He could feel the thick straps tightly wound around him and, when he wiggled, what felt like metal padlocks on every one. His ears had thick cushions on either side so the sound from the outside world was muffled. Meanwhile, Felix could feel that Ghostface had replaced the chastity cage, and a sense of revulsion filled him. There was nothing he could do about it.

He thrashed, trying to gain purchase, but the sleepsack—Felix remembered that was what it was called—was anchored all around him to... something? A bed? There was nothing he could do. He was forced to float, sightless, unable to speak, all his senses taken from him, with almost no mobility. He screamed, but he knew almost no sound had escaped.

Time passed, and Felix fell into a listless, dreamlike state. For a while, he fell asleep, and he wasn't sure if it was the aftereffects of the drug or if he'd merely worn himself out thrashing against the confinement of the sack. He awoke to a murmur in his ears, and for a moment he was grateful that Ghostface had finally come to release him from his prison... but it wasn't Ghostface. Or rather, not the real him. He'd recorded audio and was playing it through what he realized now were thick, noise-cancelling headphones built into the hood. The murmur promised that he was now Ghostface's boy once more, and told him he was lucky to be with him, and he realized it was some soft attempt at brainwashing.

Felix groaned and redoubled his efforts against the sack, but he was helplessly stuck. He tried to ignore the incessant whispering in his ear, but it was hypnotic. He took in a deep, panicked breath through the nose holes that were his only source of air. He wondered if Ghostface would take that away from him, too.

Steve cursed in frustration when the call to Vigo failed again. He'd called Zarina in Brooklyn and she'd told him that Cheryl, Élodie, Jake, Nea, Leon, Chris, Jill, and Vigo were all in Borneo closing a tear in the veil and couldn't be reached. He'd alerted everyone else, but only David and Dwight were even in Europe, the latter only because he'd been visiting David. They'd promised to help Steve, and were already on a flight to Berlin. He put the phone back in his pocket and turned his attention back to the small storeroom in Vigo's workshop. He scowled at the meager collection of weapons Vincent, one of the Imperiatti, was trying to show him.

"Still no response?" The other man asked.

"Nothing," Steve said curtly. "Is this really all you have?"

"I'm afraid so." The collection was mostly strange, arcane instruments that would be of little use to Steve. His eyes alit on a Beretta M9; it was hardly the amount of firepower he wanted, but it would be easy to conceal and one bullet would be all he needed.

"I'll take that, then," he said gruffly, trying to conceal his irritation. The other man looked a bit frightened at the expression on his face.

"But you don't even know where they are."

"Can I use the Auris for that?"

"Maybe Vigo could," Vincent said, unsure. "He's shown me how to use it to spy on the Entity's realm, but nothing more."

"Please, Vincent. We have to try. Every minute Ghostface is with Ghostface is a minute too long. I don't have time to wait for Vigo to come back, and I definitely don't have time for Detective Whoever-the-Fuck to file thirteen motions with the court to search a building Ghostface vacated a week ago. I have to find him *now*."

"I can try." Steve followed Vincent to the strange device, taking note of the man's uncertain gait. He didn't care, though. Vincent used a strange tool Steve had never seen before, and the reflection in the mirror shifted, becoming opaque, then fracturing into tendrils of swirling fog, and finally solidifying into something like a view from a

window. It remained out-of-focus, like an image with severe quality degradation from being compressed too many times.

“Damn it,” he heard Vincent mutter under his breath. But it was enough: Steve could make out the outline of a building. It looked like... a warehouse? He thought he could see a small river in the background, or perhaps it was a canal or spillway? Then the image faded, replaced by the swirling fog. “I lost it! Fuck. Let me try again.”

“That might be enough, Vincent,” Steve said, the possibilities swirling in his mind. “But keep trying, and let me know.”

“I will,” he said. “But... what are you going to do?” He glanced at where Steve had already stowed the pistol in a concealed carry holster. “You know that isn’t legal here, so you’re going to have to be careful.”

“I know that,” Steve said impatiently.

“Do you even know how to use it?” Vincent blanched a little when he noticed Steve’s expression and quickly added, “Because I certainly wouldn’t.”

“I’m from small-town Indiana, Vincent. Of course I know how to use the fucking thing. And when I find Ghostface, I’m going to.”

Felix badly needed to piss and his stomach growled. Every part of his body ached from being unable to move for so long; was he going to get bed sores? Still, Ghostface left him there, that infuriating murmur droning on and on in his ears. It told him what Ghostface wanted from him, how he was expected to behave, how he could earn “treats”, and what would “force” Ghostface to punish him for “misbehaving”.

He’d long since stopped struggling against the sack, except to try to reposition his aching limbs. There was no point. His jaw ached from the gag, but it wasn’t coming out, and there was almost certainly no one to hear him scream anyway—except Ghostface, who would *want* to hear him scream at some point. The thought made him weep silently; the tears pooled against the padding of his blindfold. He’d

thought he was done with this, except in his nightmares...

Abruptly, the audio stopped, and Felix would have jumped in place if he could have moved. He felt Ghostface caressing his body even through the sack, and he wanted desperately for those hands to undo the locks even if it meant Ghostface was going to want to fuck him. He would gladly take that over his current prison. *Maybe that was part of the point...*

Ghostface, for once, did exactly what Felix wanted. He slowly removed the hood, and Felix stretched his jaw as the gag was pulled out. The light was blinding to him, but as his eyes slowly focused he realized he was in a full dungeon, maybe 400 square meters, that was completely soundproofed. He was lying on a 4-poster bed in the corner of the room with a solid steel frame, his sleepsack anchored to it securely. All manner of other implements and torture devices filled the room, and Felix did his best to ignore the fact that he would grow to learn all of them, in time.

He had the sinking realization that this small room might be where he spent the rest of his life.

Ghostface was standing over him, unmasked, wearing a simple t-shirt and tight athletic pants, as if he'd just come from the gym. If Felix hadn't known his face intimately, he wouldn't have looked twice at this man as he passed him on the street.

"Thank you, sir," Felix said immediately, knowing it was what Ghostface wanted to hear.

"Ah," the other man sighed, "I see you're already learning. That's good." He wiped a tear from Felix's face; one finger gently traced the curve of his cheekbones. "But you know what your mouth is good for, don't you? Because it's not talking."

"For... for sucking your cock, sir," Felix said immediately, because the audio had told him to say it.

Ghostface nodded, a satisfied little grin spreading across his face. "I still think you need more time to think about your place, boy." He said suddenly, and he grabbed the hood again. Every muscle in

Felix's body screamed at the sight.

"P-please, sir," he said. "I... I know my place. It's with you as my... as my master. But I'm so, so hungry, and I need... I need to use the bathroom."

Ghostface cocked his head, considering it. Felix hated this man so much. He had to beg to be fed like an abused dog. "Alright, boy." Felix almost cried out in relief when Ghostface produced a key and started to unlock the padlocks on his sleepsack. Within minutes, he was slowly helping Felix out of it. Felix could barely move, and he felt the sticky shine of sweat covering his body. He was embarrassed by it, but Ghostface bent over and licked his nipple, then bit softly into his pectoral.

"Beautiful," he said into Felix's skin. Ghostface pulled the sleepsack out from under him and let Felix lie naked on the bed. He gently massaged the muscles in Felix's arms and legs. Felix cursed himself for enjoying the feeling, for feeling grateful to this man, the person who had put him in that sack in the first place. He remembered stories he'd read about Stockholm syndrome, and falling in love with your captor. Was this why? Because they became your only source of comfort in a world of pain they created for you?

When Felix started to have feeling in his arms and legs again, Ghostface produced a bedpan and Felix blushed furiously as he pissed into it; the experience was humiliating, but Ghostface didn't seem to mind. Felix wondered how many times he'd had to do this in the fog. Did he have to piss there? He couldn't remember.

When he was done, he shook the chastity cage gently, letting the last drops trickle out from the small hole in its tip. Ghostface gave him a small bowl of grapes then and Felix ate them three at a time; his mouth still ached from the gag, but he chewed as quickly as he could. For as hungry as he was, the grapes tasted like the food of the gods.

"Thank you, sir," he said again. Ghostface nodded and lay beside him then, drawing Felix's head into his chest and wrapping his arms around him. Even here in the real world, he seemed colder than a normal man, but Felix was happy to be out of that damnable sack and welcomed his embrace, even *liked* it. That frightened him; what

if the audio was really working? Surely brainwashing like that was just a pseudoscience...

Felix jumped slightly when Ghostface's hand abruptly moved to his ass and a questing finger entered him. Ghostface's other hand gripped him tightly, stopping him from moving—not that Felix had any intention of trying, even if he could. There was nowhere for him to go.

"What is this for, boy?" Ghostface asked him.

"It belongs to you, sir," Felix said quietly into the hard muscles of Ghostface's chest. "It's yours to... yours to fuck whenever you want." Felix hated saying the words, but he parroted his lines obediently. He hoped, if he didn't fight back, Ghostface might give him enough leniency to allow him an opportunity to escape. All fighting back would get him would be pain. More pain, anyway, than Ghostface would inflict just for his own pleasure. The audio had made that clear, too.

"And I badly want to," Ghostface said. "I've so missed being inside you. Of you servicing me as you were always meant to. Isn't that right, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes to what?"

"Yes, I was always meant to service your cock." Inwardly, he burned with the humiliation of the words, though he tried to hide this from his face. This psychopath really, truly, believed that that was Felix's purpose in life. If Felix protested, he would earn another day in the sleepsack and be forced to listen again to Ghostface's voice telling him so. The audio had promised that every time he resisted, it would be worse for him.

Just do what you have to, Felix thought. He'll give you an opening to escape eventually, surely...Or Steve, or Vigo, or the police, or someone, will come for me. I just have to endure until then. I can do it. I can take it. I have before. I can do this. I...I can. Please... let me be able to endure this. Please, Steve, please... I need you...

Ghostface was ready now. He roughly flipped Felix onto his back and tied his wrists and ankles spread-eagle to anchor points on the bed, then pulled off his pants in one fluid motion. As Ghostface ran his hands through Felix's hair, he rubbed the hard outline of his cock in his briefs against Felix's mouth. It felt oddly familiar to Felix, and he wasn't sure why. He opened his mouth obediently, ready to get this over with.

"Such an eager guy," Ghostface said, and Felix suddenly realized why it felt familiar. Ghostface had been watching him and Steve! *How? How could he have known that?* Felix's eyes opened wide at the realization, and Ghostface gripped his chin roughly so his fingers dug painfully into Felix's cheeks, forcing his mouth open and his head up so that he had to look directly into Ghostface's eyes. He loved that look of indignant realization, Felix knew. *You sick piece of shit.* Then his other hand, buried in Felix's hair, guided Felix's mouth onto him, and Felix did what he had to. At least here in the real world, it would be over faster.

12. Chapter 12

Felix shivered slightly under the covers and Ghostface drew him closer. His hands were bound in front of him with coarse rope, but it was his only restraint for the moment aside from the chastity cage. He'd spent the last few nights in a small metal cage with only a pillow, shackled and muzzled (he preferred it nonetheless to the confinement of the sleepsack), but he'd "earned" the privilege of sleeping with Ghostface tonight.

It disgusted him, but he was also filled with a twisted pride that he'd earned the right from behaving and... performing well for Ghostface's pleasure. It was an irrational feeling, he knew. He worried it was because his nights listening to his brainwashing in the sleepsack (Ghostface had done this to him at least four times now and Felix was starting to lose track as the days blurred together) were starting to take effect.

He pretended the cold arm around his chest was Steve's, that he was back, safe, in their apartment, but the arm was too muscled and too short. Whereas Steve was lean, and his skin warm and soft, Ghostface's abs were cold and hard against Felix's back. It was soothing against the sore whip marks that still lined his back, though Ghostface had taken care not to do anything that would cause permanent damage since this was the only body Felix had in this world. He'd lamented that fact to Felix many times in the past few days, and Felix was beginning to fear it was only a matter of time before he decided it was worth it. Once, while locked in a metal stockade, Felix's mouth had been so sore he could hardly suck and Ghostface had threatened to tattoo his face with the word "cocksucker" until he did better. How long would it be before he decided to do that just for fun?

Still, Felix clung to the illusion, and for the first time in what he thought might have been the week since Ghostface had taken him back—*Wait, no, abducted*—he felt safe. That was stupid too, and he knew it, but there was something comfortable about Ghostface holding him like this. He'd earned his place here in bed with him. *By letting him rape you*, he forced himself to remember.

Felix wondered if this might be his chance to escape. Ghostface would fall asleep soon—for all his malice, cruelty, and strength, he was just a normal man now—and all that would stand between him and freedom was the key to the door on the nightstand. It was merely an outline in the soundproofing, but he always carefully watched Ghostface open it when he entered (on those occasions when Ghostface hadn't left him hooded or blindfolded); he almost always stowed the key around his neck.

Tonight, Felix had surreptitiously watched him place it on the set of drawers next to the bed where he stored his training implements: clothespins, whips, paddles, electrodes, and so on. Felix had come to dread the sight of those drawers opening. But was this a test? Ghostface was no fool. Most likely he knew Felix had seen him set it there. *It must be a test. It's such an obviously tempting place to put it. But how can I pass up this opportunity? What if he really thinks I am already broken, and he doesn't need to worry? I have to try.*

Felix waited in the dark, pretending to be asleep. After some time, Ghostface's arm slackened around his chest and he could hear the man snoring softly. His other arm was beneath the pillow, and Felix feared he would awaken if he felt the pressure of Felix's head removed. Felix tested this by moving forward so his head was no longer on Ghostface's arm. He waited, but Ghostface continued to snore.

Felix let out a silent sigh of relief. He extricated himself slowly, carefully, from the sleeping Ghostface's arm. He waited, just out of reach but still plausibly behaving in bed, to see if that roused his captor. When he was satisfied it hadn't, Felix finally stood up. His hands were bound, but in front of him so he still had a great deal of control.

This was it: the moment of no return. If he committed, and this was a test, Ghostface would punish him harshly. But if it wasn't, and he succeeded, he would be back with Steve by morning. That was worth the risk.

With only a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the key and made for the door as quietly as he could. He let his hand hover over the small keyhole for a moment, bracing for the realization that it didn't fit the

lock. He had to stop himself from crying out in joy when it fit neatly into the keyhole and the door swung open for him. Felix rushed through, closed the door, and locked it behind him from the outside. He wanted to cry tears of joy, but he suppressed the urge. Even with the soundproofing, Ghostface being asleep was to his benefit. He had to try to get out of here as fast as he could; he was still very much in the lion's den.

The room where he found himself looked like the locker room one might find in a factory. One hung open, Ghostface's robe, mask, and cruel hunting knife inside it. Felix sat on the ground and planted the knife between his feet upright and used it as a makeshift saw to cut the rope from his wrists. An expansive tool chest sat on one side of the wall, and Felix surmised Ghostface had used it to put together most of the cruel devices he used on Felix. If he had time, he would search it and the other lockers for the key to his chastity cage, but that was something he could deal with later. He thought briefly about returning to the dungeon and using the knife to slit Ghostface's throat while he slept, but if Ghostface woke up... safer to leave him locked in there, Felix thought, and the police could deal with him when they came.

He almost cried with joy again when he saw another locker in the corner had the clothes he'd been wearing when Ghostface had abducted him that night: a simple pair of black jeans, boots, briefs, and a soft sweater, but to Felix it was a blessing. He hadn't been allowed any clothes since that night, and covering his body again made him feel whole. His phone was gone, but his wallet and keys were still in his pants pockets. It made him feel closer to a real person. He couldn't wait to take a shower by himself again; Ghostface had been shackling him and washing his body clean in the shower himself, the way one might wash a dog. It was humiliating. *You don't have to worry about that any more*, he thought, but still he felt ill at ease. *What if he has another key?*

Felix wasted no time. As soon as he laced his boots, he crept slowly out of the room, walked up a long flight of stairs, and found himself in a large warehouse with rows and rows of shelving. It appeared to be abandoned; the shelves were mostly empty, and the pallets and boxes that remained were covered in a thick layer of dust. He

couldn't see anyone, but at the far end of the building he saw the door. He didn't stop to examine anything; he didn't have the time.

As soon as he pushed the handle, he felt a sudden sense of dread, like the air before a lightning strike. He immediately realized why when he heard a soft *click* and felt a sharp bite in his neck. His hand flew to it, expecting blood, but it hadn't been a bullet: it was a dart. "Verdammt!" he screamed aloud, but he knew it was already too late; he'd been given a large dose of tranquilizer and could already feel it starting to take effect. If only he'd fucking checked to see if the door was booby-trapped! It had been a test after all.

He walked across the threshold in a daze, and cried out for help while he still could. It was his only chance now, but there was no one around in the darkness, and Felix was about to collapse. "Please! Anyone! Help me!" He was met with cold, indifferent silence as the ground rushed to meet him.

Steve slammed the car door shut as he sat in the passenger seat. Another dead end. This building wasn't really abandoned at all, and it didn't look anything like the hazy images Vincent had been able to conjure in the Auris. They'd checked it because it had a spillway on the map that might have fit what he saw, but it had no water in it.

David sighed as he took the driver's seat. "Not this one either," he was saying into a cell phone. Zarina was on the other end: she was helping them where she could, finding leads for them to follow. "I know, this is taking too long." For the past week, he, David, and Dwight had been checking as many buildings as they could within 20 kilometers of Berlin. So far, they'd found nothing, and now their search was taking them farther and farther from the city. He put Zarina on speakerphone so Steve could hear her.

"There's one more lead here; it's the farthest one out at about 50 kilometers."

"Can you text me the address?" Steve said. "We can scope it out today and go in tomorrow."

"I don't know," Dwight said uncertainly from the back seat. "It'll be

dark by the time we get there.” Steve almost pounded the dash in frustration but remembered that they were only trying to help.

“I know you’re right,” Steve said finally, collecting himself. “But it’s been eight days. What if... what if Ghostface has already done... something... irrevocable?”

David looked at him with the same determination that had borne them through so many Trials together. “He won’t,” David said. “He knows he can’t. Not here in the real world. That’s not what he wants from Felix.”

“We don’t know what he wants. It’s impossible to understand the mind of this psychopath.”

“Whatever happens, Steve, we’ll deal with it,” Zarina said. “We all care about Felix. We are going to find him. We’re not going to stop looking until we do.”

“I want to kill Ghostface myself,” Steve said suddenly. His hands were balled into fists in his lap.

“I’ll help you with that,” David said, a dark little smile playing across his face.

“Me too,” Dwight said, with an uncharacteristic steel in his voice. “Felix was always there for me in that Hell. The least I can do is help him now.”

“You’ll have to tell me all about it,” Zarina said, a dark mirth evident in her voice. Steve was glad that his friends weren’t trying to talk sense into him. He smiled, grateful to have them by his side.

“Let’s go then,” David said, and pressed the ignition button.

Felix awoke in the sleepsack he’d come to know all too well, though without the hood. Ghostface was slapping him hard across the face, an icy glare trained on him.

“You dumb little cunt,” Ghostface said, leaning in to his ear. “Did you really think that was going to work?”

Felix didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry, Master," he said finally.
"I... I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

"Remind me. What are you?"

"Y-your slave, sir."

Ghostface cocked his head evilly. "I don't think you really believe that yet, do you?"

"Please! I-I do, I swear, I just... I had a moment of weakness and I—" Ghostface cut him off with a hard slap across the face.

"That mouth is good for one thing only, boy. Remind me."

"F-for sucking your cock, sir."

"Then why do you keep talking?" Felix nodded to show he understood, a small tear beading in the corner of his eye. Ghostface wiped it away without comment. "A slave should remember that." He left for a moment then, and Felix struggled slightly in his bonds. Ghostface had added a diaper this time and Felix was terrified of what that might mean. He felt a plug deep in his ass and electrodes covering his lower body within the sack. He desperately wanted it out.

Suddenly his captor returned, this time with a different hood than the one he normally used. He wrapped it around Felix's head, and Felix didn't fight it when the gag slipped into his mouth. He realized that there was no opening for his nose, and he started to protest, but he couldn't speak, couldn't see, and the audio was already starting.

Felix couldn't focus as he slowly ran out of air; he struggled violently against the sack; his breathing became rapid and shallow, and soon he was screaming like a cornered animal into the gag and thrashing as much as he could. But there was nothing he could do. Just when he thought he would pass out, some mechanism in the hood allowed him air. Felix gasped, grateful to be able to breathe again.

At that exact moment, he felt the harsh sting of electricity on his lower body and in his ass and screamed again. He soon realized it was a cycle: while he could breathe, he was shocked, and as soon as

it ended, his air supply was cut off. He was trapped in a cycle of agony, that endless audio still whispering in his ear. This was his punishment, he knew, and it was likely only the first part. He should have known he could never escape Ghostface. For the first time, he lost hope that anyone was coming for him. This was his life now, and if he wanted to avoid being punished, he was going to have to accept it.

13. Chapter 13

“This is the place,” Steve said immediately as he surveyed it through the binoculars. “That looks exactly like what I saw in the Auris.”

“You’re sure?” David cracked his knuckles.

“Positive.” Steve’s hand strayed unconsciously to the gun. “What the fuck are we waiting for? Let’s go in now. We can catch him while he’s asleep. He’s just a man now. No more supernatural gifts from the Entity.”

David twitched. He wasn’t one to shy away from a fight. “I agree. Every minute Felix is in there is another minute that nutter is hurting him, and I can’t fuckin’ stand the thought of that. I’ll call Zarina and let her know. If we fuck this up, the police will come either way before he has a chance to escape with Felix. One way or another, this ends tonight.”

Dwight swallowed, a little of his nervousness showing on his face, but he nodded resolutely nonetheless.

Zarina wasn’t sure of their plan, but she agreed to it anyway. As soon as David hung up, they crept slowly up to the warehouse, carefully watching out for any hidden cameras or traps. They found a strange trap at the door with a gun aimed at the exit, but it appeared to have already been sprung. What that meant, they didn’t know.

To be safe, they crawled through an unsecured nearby window instead. The warehouse was dark, and there was no immediate indication of human occupation, but Steve could sense that they were in the right place. The trap at the door confirmed it, if nothing else. It was 2 in the morning now; Ghostface would surely be asleep. If they could find him while he slept, they could end this quickly and get Felix out of there without any difficulty.

They searched the upper floor of the warehouse, but everything in it appeared to be abandoned, including the admin offices. Then they found the entrance to the basement, and David looked uncertainly at Steve. Those stairs conjured dark memories of the Trial grounds, but

they weren't about to stop now.

Steve nodded and went first. At the bottom, he emerged into a small corridor with two doors. One was open and led to a small locker room. Steve's heart started racing when he saw one of them had Ghostface's robes and knife inside; he took the knife so Ghostface wouldn't be able to use it. Another had the clothes Felix was wearing the day he was abducted. Steve practically ran to it and picked up the soft sweater he knew well; it was the closest he'd been to Felix in over a week.

"He's really here," Steve said. "He was wearing this when he was taken."

"You think he's in there?" Dwight asked, pointing at a steel door in the wall that locked from their side.

"A door that locks from the outside," Steve said, disgusted. "I think it's a safe bet. Be ready. Ghostface might be in there, too."

"I think I should wait at the door," David said, "so if he comes up behind us he can't lock us in there, too. He won't kill Felix, but he won't hesitate to kill us."

Steve nodded and his hand reached for the thick deadbolt. He hesitated; if Felix wasn't here, he had no idea what he was going to do. As the door swung open, Steve couldn't believe what he was seeing. His eyes slowly took in the fully soundproofed dungeon and the cruel torture and restraint devices that filled it. Bile rose to his throat as he thought about Felix being restrained in them, and then a wave of indignant rage.

He saw a bed in the corner, and in it... *Oh my God*. He rushed over as fast as he could; every part of the sleepsack was padlocked shut and he could see that Felix was writhing inside but his struggles were hardly visible. A camera was trained on him, and Dwight smashed it immediately. Steve pulled the breath control apparatus from Felix's face, but the rest of the hood was padlocked on, including the blindfold, so Felix couldn't see him.

"M-master, please!" Felix was practically screaming, in a hysterical

voice Steve had never heard him use before. It chilled him to the bone. “I’ve learned my lesson, I have, just let me out. P-please, let me out!”

“Felix, it’s me,” Steve said, his voice breaking. “I’m gonna get you out of there.” But he realized Felix couldn’t hear him. He was gasping now, still begging, and Steve put a hand to his lips to try to quiet him so Ghostface wouldn’t hear. Felix opened his mouth with a soft sob and started to suck on his fingers. That was the moment Steve started crying in earnest.

He glanced at David watching from the door, a profound sadness on his face. Steve withdrew his fingers, and Felix whimpered again. The sound reminded Steve of a horrifically abused animal. Steve could feel Dwight hovering around him, wanting to help, but as helpless as Steve felt in that moment.

“I-I’m sorry, I can do better, give me a chance to—” then Felix was screaming, and Steve immediately saw why. The device on the chest of drawers next to him was cycling through a shock regimen for electrodes he realized were attached underneath the sleepsack. Steve turned it off as soon he figured out the controls and Felix moaned; his breathing was shallow and erratic. Steve was worried about his heart, but he was no doctor; what could he do?

“Where are we gonna find the fucking keys for that?” David asked from the door. Steve saw he’d drawn a pair of brass knuckles.

“Fuck that,” Steve said, and pulled out Ghostface’s knife. He sawed the leather straps of the sleepsack roughly one by one, slowly freeing Felix’s body, and cut through the ropes tying the sack tightly together. He was gentler when he got to the hood so as not to hurt Felix, and slowly pulled off the ripped remains.

“Thank you, Master,” Felix said, and Steve saw that his eyes were deadened and unfocused. “I’ll behave now, I promise. I belong with you. I understand that now.”

“Felix, it’s me,” Steve said again, his voice wavering even more. “I’m here to get you of this place.” Felix looked at him then, and Steve thought he looked as if he was staring at him from the bottom of a

well. The spark had gone out from those beautiful green eyes he knew so well.

“Steve?” Felix said at last, his eyes slowly focusing as he blinked against what must, to him, be blinding light. “Am I... am I dead now? Is it over?”

Steve bit back another sob. “N-no. We’re here to rescue you. David, Dwight, and I.”

Felix was crying then, and Steve hoped it was from relief. He drew his boyfriend’s head to his chest and held him there for a long time. He was cognizant of the fact that every passing moment was a chance for Ghostface to come upon them and foil their escape, but he couldn’t pull away. Felix needed him more than ever. Felix tried to sit up then, but even with the straps broken the sleepsack held him fast. Steve quickly unzipped it and with Dwight’s help pulled Felix’s arms from the padded sleeves, then his legs, and quickly removed the soiled diaper, electrodes, and even the plug without comment so as not to humiliate Felix further. David looked respectfully away, but Steve knew he’d seen, and Steve in turn had seen the flash of rage as David realized what Ghostface had been doing. Dwight said nothing, but Steve knew he was enraged, too.

Felix lay limply on the bed, still crying and feebly trying to move; Steve saw the vicious whip marks that covered him. Steve grabbed him and pulled him up into his arms; Felix’s matted hair brushed limply against Steve’s shoulder. He smelled of misery, but Steve didn’t care.

“Can you walk?”

Felix nodded, but when Steve tried to stand up with him Felix’s legs collapsed underneath him and it was all Steve could do to keep him from falling, so Steve set him back down on the bed.

“J-just wait here, okay?” Steve tried to project calm authority, but he knew his voice was shaking. “I’m going to go get your clothes, and then we’re going to get the Hell out of here.”

When Steve returned, Felix had hardly moved. Dwight was sitting

with him, gently holding his hand. Steve wondered how long he'd been trapped like that, and realized he didn't want to know. He dressed Felix himself, and Felix said nothing. He was beyond embarrassment.

"Please tell me this is real," Felix said at last. He was reaching for Steve, and Steve pulled him close again. "N-not some kind of... hallucination or... or t-test."

"Of course it is. I—we, *everyone* who loves you—were never going to stop looking."

"I thought... I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life here," Felix said. His breathing was still erratic and his chest heaved with repressed sobs. "I didn't know if you would ever be able to f-find me,"

"But we did." Steve pulled back slightly to look into Felix's eyes. Some of the light in them had mercifully returned. "Okay? But we need to go now. I need you to try to stand up."

"I can carry him," David said from the door, one eye watching the entrance to the locker room. "Time is not on our side. Every extra moment here is a risk."

"What the fuck is this? How did you vermin find this place?" a voice said from beyond the doorway. Felix collapsed to his knees next to the bed when he heard it, and Steve's blood chilled. He was going to get his chance after all. "I remember you," he said to David, who looked like a lion about to pounce. "I enjoyed hearing your screams."

"I'll enjoy hearing yours, you fucking tosser," and then David launched himself at him. Ghostface sidestepped the first blow easily, and punched David hard in the face. Steve thought he must have broken his nose, but the blow seemed only to excite David. He followed up with a vicious right hook with his brass knuckles that clearly took Ghostface by surprise, and even from the other room Steve heard the distinctive crack of splintered bone. Ghostface staggered backward, blood flowing freely from his mouth, and spat out two teeth.

He came back at David with a powerful kick and David was suddenly on the ground. Dwight made to head over and help, but Steve was faster: he pulled out the gun and turned off the safety. He pointed it directly at Ghostface before the other man could capitalize on the opening. “Don’t fucking move,” he said, letting all of his hatred flow into those words.

Ghostface stopped, knowing he was caught. David scrambled backward and stood up out of Steve’s line-of-sight so as not to block the shot. Ghostface cocked his head arrogantly. “So the little scum thinks he can come here and just leave with my boy, is that it?” Ghostface took a step forward; his words were slurred from the broken mess of his jaw. “I’ve seen how pathetically you beg for mercy when I put the slightest pressure on you. You don’t have it in you to —”

Steve shot him in the shoulder and the other man staggered backward, a blossom of red appearing through the soft t-shirt he wore. He growled in shock and pain.

“You don’t get to speak anymore,” Steve said. He gestured with the gun, which he held confidently with both hands. “Here, you have no special power over us. Your brains will paint that wall just as surely as anyone else’s. David, Dwight: tie him to the bed.”

David raised an eyebrow at him, but he didn’t question it. With the gun still trained on him, Ghostface didn’t fight back as David tied his hands and Dwight tied his feet to the four corners of the bed with the same rope he’d used on Felix. Felix hadn’t moved from the floor, and Ghostface looked at him pointedly.

“You’re not going to let them do this, are you, boy?” Steve nodded at David and the boxer punched Ghostface hard in the chest.

“What part of ‘shut the fuck up’ is so hard for you to understand?” David said viciously. Steve trained the gun at Ghostface’s head, and the other man looked at him in silent challenge. Arrogant until the end.

“Steve, wait,” Felix said finally, pulling himself up slowly. Ghostface smiled triumphantly at Steve, but then Felix said, “I want to be the

one to do it.” Steve wished he had a camera to capture the look of complete confusion that spread across the monster’s face at that moment. Steve looked at Felix and nodded, handing him the gun. Ghostface was struggling now, trying to free himself, but it was no use. Steve savored seeing the tables turned on him.

Felix raised the gun in a shaky hand, and Steve saw the pain of every moment with this man cross his face: not just the horror of the past eight days, but the hundreds of thousands of Trials, most of which he couldn’t even remember, but which haunted him still. Ghostface just stared at the object of his obsession, the man he’d tortured for so long. Felix’s hand shook more violently as he met his once-captor’s gaze.

“Remember who I am to you, boy.” Ghostface said harshly. “I’m your master. You’re my property. You do as I say. You should have learned that by now. Put down that gun.”

“You fucking—” Dwight started, but Steve raised a hand to cut him off.

“No,” Felix said. “You’re... you’re nothing to me. You’re not gonna hurt us... hurt *me* anymore.” It was clear Ghostface was furious.

“You still haven’t learned your place,” he hissed.

“How fucking mental do you have to be to not understand what’s happening right now?” David said, punching Ghostface again.

“Where’s the key to this?” Felix asked, lowering the gun to motion at what Steve knew to be the chastity cage. David looked confused, though.

Ghostface laughed darkly. “I had no intention of ever removing it,” he said. “The key is gone.”

“You fucking piece of shit,” Steve said.

“You kept threatening to castrate me when I didn’t... when I didn’t perform well enough,” Felix said, and David and Steve practically jumped. “You wouldn’t have said that if you couldn’t remove the cage. Tell me where it is.”

“You’re not the one who gives commands, you stupid little faggot.”

Felix handed the gun back to Steve, picked up the knife where Steve had left it, and drove it deeply into the palm of Ghostface’s hand. The man screamed and it was music to Steve’s ears. “Where is it?” Felix repeated.

“Untie me now, boy. This has gone on long enough.”

Felix pulled the knife out and stabbed the other hand without hesitating, Ghostface just grunted this time.

“I’m—I’m not your fucking ‘boy’! Stop fucking calling me that!”

“I’ve taught you that you are so many times, before, boy. And for years and years, far longer than your life here in this pathetic, boring world, you knew it. Until I wanted you to forget it again so I could break you in again. I so love that part. If only you could remember...”

Felix was shaking. “All of this... why? I never understood *why*. Why did you choose *me*? Out of the millions the Entity could have taken for you.”

Ghostface cocked his head, as if the question didn’t make any sense. “From the moment I saw you I knew you belonged with me. You’re a rare beauty, boy. I knew you needed to be mine; I knew I needed your body under my control. I knew I wanted to see that mouth on me, and hear your little whimpers... and your screams, your moans, your begging: for mercy, for more of my dick, for the chance to please me and earn rewards. And hundreds of thousands of times, I enjoyed it.” He smiled hungrily, and Dwight took the opportunity for the first time to punch him hard in the face. It hardly fazed him.

His response wasn’t an answer that would quell Felix’s nightmares, Steve knew. But there was no good answer to that question, or nothing that would help Felix make sense of what had happened to him, anyway.

Felix sighed, closing his eyes. “Just... tell us where the key is.”

“Getting your cage off is a privilege you haven’t earned.”

Felix was done listening. He took the gun back and put it to Ghostface's temple. The monster didn't flinch.

"I-I will fucking shoot you, you know." Felix's shaky voice belied the intimidating image he tried to project. "When you're gone we can just... just find the key here. Or pay a locksmith. It doesn't matter." His voice broke. "It will be...it will be *justice* after everything you've done to me. To us. The killing, the brutalizing, the mutilation, the... the rape. You're a fucking monster and the world will be a better place without you. You should never have been let back in in the first place."

"Do it," he hissed. "I will still be with you, forever. You can't escape me. And we *will* meet again."

Steve saw Felix's hand falter. "W-what the fuck does that mean?"

"I told you I owned your dreams. That fool Vigo blocked that connection from me when he weakened the Entity, but the Entity hasn't given up on you. It wants you back. These other vermin it can live without; it will just find others. But you? It's only a matter of time before it manages to capture you again. And the deal I made... I will return there when I die. You'll be mine again, to hunt down and break and then to own. If I can't have you here, then I'll have you there. Forever, boy. And this time there will be no escape."

Steve felt the color draining from his face, but it was nothing compared to the ashen look on Felix's.

"Y-you're lying," Steve found himself saying, but Ghostface had eyes only for Felix.

"He knows I'm not," was all the killer said. "And boy... you will be punished for this. Mark my words."

A long silence filled the room, and it was clear Felix had completely shut down. The hand with the gun dropped limply to his side.

Steve couldn't take it any longer. He took the gun from him and shot Ghostface directly in the face. Then again, and twice more in the heart. Felix didn't move, even when the blood splattered his face; he

had eyes only for the corpse of his captor.

“It’s over,” Steve said. “Felix, look at me.” It took Felix several seconds before he did.

“He was lying to get you to spare him, okay? And even if he’s not, we *won’t let that happen*.” But he knew Felix didn’t believe him. Whether or not it was true, Ghostface’s last words would haunt him forever.

14. Epilogue

Steve awoke to the sound of rain splattering against the bedroom windows. His head was nestled against Felix's chest; he could feel the *tap-tap* of his heartbeat through the soft warmth of his skin. It was a beautiful thing to wake up to, but he could already tell Felix had been awake for a long time. When he looked up, he saw Felix's eyes fixed on the rain dripping down the windows.

"Everything alright?" Steve asked softly. Felix looked at him and smiled. Because he knew Felix so well, he could see right through it to the melancholy underneath.

"Just fine," he said quietly. Steve was reminded of their quotidian ritual in the fog. It was a lie then; was it a lie now? Felix must have read this thought on his face because he added, "I had another nightmare."

"Not a lucid one though, right?"

"No. Not since I got you back. But this one..." Felix turned his head again to look out the window. Steve's head was resting partially on his bicep, and he could the slight tension that developed in the muscle as Felix remembered. "Well, it wasn't totally a nightmare. I died, safe and happy, with you by my side." Felix turned to smile at Steve then, a beautiful, warm smile that lit his eyes in a way that made Steve's heart flutter. "Your face was lined and your hair was gray but you were still so beautiful... Julia was there, holding my hand." His smile faded, and Steve missed it dearly. "And then... after, I 'awoke' in my young body. I thought it was a pleasant dream, but then I saw it: the campfire. And I knew *he* was already stalking me."

"It was just a nightmare," Steve said as he interlaced his fingers with Felix's free hand.

"Was it?" Felix turned back to the window. Steve brought his hand to Felix's cheek and forced him to look into his eyes.

"Yes," he said resolutely. "You had the first part of it right. But when you die, and I die, we'll meet again somewhere better. Not there."

You're never going back there, okay? I know it."

He could see in Felix's eyes that he didn't believe him. "I've never believed in 'somewhere better', Steve. I used to think death would be... like before I was born: nothing. But now I... I'm afraid Steve. What if my '*anima*' or '*élan vital*' or whatever Vigo wants to call it is tied to that place in a way that makes me return to it when I die?"

"Well I do. I believe we'll meet there again, after this life. That's something even the Entity can't take from us anymore."

"If you say so."

"Think about it though," Steve said, not giving up. "If that were the case, Ghostface would have taunted you with it before he died." He felt Felix's entire body stiffen underneath him at the mention of that night over a year ago. "But that's not what he said. He said it wanted to recapture you, and the more work we do with Vigo the harder that is for it. Why would it need to put in that extra effort if it could just wait for you to die? Time has almost no meaning to it."

Felix nodded softly. "I had considered that," was all he said. The rain was picking up now, and there was a sudden crack of thunder in the distance. Steve didn't know what to say to break the silence. He knew what Felix was thinking: there was no way to know for sure. They had no evidence one way or another. Even Vigo didn't know. Their only option was to make the most of their time together in this life, in case it was all they had.

With that in mind, Steve pulled Felix closer to him and kissed him warmly. He didn't taste as good as he usually did given that they hadn't yet gotten out of bed, but Steve didn't mind. Right now he wanted to distract him. Felix kissed him back, and drew him close so their foreheads were touching and they both lay on their sides. Felix wrapped his leg around Steve's, and laid his hand softly on his back. It was a wonderfully intimate feeling.

"I'm sorry," Felix said, "I shouldn't sour our morning like this." It made Steve irrationally angry.

"You really need to stop apologizing. Listen, I'm here for you. I want

to be here for you. I want you to tell me about this. Don't ever think you can't talk to me.”

“I know.” He could feel Felix’s smile more than he could see it in their close proximity. “You’re the only other person who really understands. I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” Steve said. “Since Julia’s with your mom today, why don’t we take it easy? Order in, stream something. Maybe you can help me... *study*.”

Felix laughed softly. “Such a smooth talker.”

“What could be sexier than studying?”

“Anything, really. But don’t worry. *You* make it sexy. The way you brush your fingers through your hair when you encounter a hard problem, the way you bite your lip... Don’t even get me started on the sexy way you look at those flashcards.”

“Hey,” Steve said in protest at the last example. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Maybe a little.”

“I have a whole series of retorts involving architecture swirling around my head right now.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me. I know how *damn fine* I look at the drafting table.”

Steve laughed. “Okay, honestly, you do. But that’s because you just look damn fine all the time.”

“I like your idea, but we’re supposed to meet Dwight and David for dinner later, remember? They flew in last night and have some kind of announcement for us.”

“Damn,” Steve whispered. He was happy they were visiting for the week, but he never wanted to leave this bed. Felix massaged his shoulders gently and Steve had to suppress a moan. How was he so good at that, even from that awkward angle?

"I'm gonna hop in the shower and then I'll make us some breakfast. Pancakes, maybe, for my American man."

"Maybe I should join you?" Steve almost winked but didn't want to go over-the-top with his corny one-liners. He was sure Felix would get tired of them eventually, but he never seemed to.

"Well, it's better for the environment to save some water, after all, isn't it?" Felix kissed him again, and Steve felt that wonderful expanding warmth in his chest that he always felt when Felix kissed him like this. Felix extricated himself slowly from Steve's embrace, but held his hand and led him to the bathroom.

Steve decided to take some initiative then and slowly took Felix's soft t-shirt off for him. Felix lifted his arms, letting him do it. Steve loved the lean lines of his body; he traced them softly with his fingers as Felix did the same for Steve, and wasted no time pulling off the briefs he'd slept in, too. Steve felt his manhood growing to attention as Felix's fingers softly grazed his thighs in that motion, and he let out a quiet gasp as Felix freed it from its cloth confinement. The only clothing that stood between them then was Felix's underwear, and Steve couldn't let that continue. He pulled them off, trying to excite Felix as he had Steve. Steve's own arousal grew when he saw Felix's dick swelling as his was. Felix's hands gripped his waist softly, ready for what came next.

As Steve removed the briefs, he remembered something Felix had said to him once. "Such an eager guy," he said. Felix tensed underneath him like a rope stretched taut. Steve wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, but Felix's expression had turned dark, as though a rain cloud from outside had come into the bathroom and rolled across it. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Felix said immediately, and Steve didn't want to press the issue. It had taken Felix months to overcome his trauma and really enjoy having sex again; Steve had been patient, and they worked closely with a therapist so Felix could open up and feel safe. The process had been harder than when Felix first left the fog, because though he'd suffered worse there, he could only remember a small fraction of it. Nonetheless, his therapist had said that his memory loss would make him take longer to recover, in the end, and Steve

believed him.

“Hey,” Steve said softly into Felix’s ears. “It’s okay. We can try again later.”

“Fuck that,” Felix said, and pushed Steve against the glass of the shower door, kissing him deeply, hard enough that Steve’s head was forced into the glass. He liked the feeling. Felix gripped him tightly around the waist, and Steve took the chance to let his hands explore Felix’s body. Felix pressed himself against him, taking the lead, and Steve wanted the moment to last forever. Finally, Felix pulled Steve away from the glass, opened the door, and pushed him gently inside.

The water from the rainfall showerhead above them took a moment to get warm, but when it did Felix grabbed his shampoo and started running it through his now-dampened hair. His beautiful body glistened, and Steve couldn’t resist staring at the way the water hugged its contours. There were mercifully no scars from Ghostface; he’d been very careful in that regard, though not for Felix’s benefit. *Piece of shit.*

Steve wiped the dark thought from his mind and took the bottle from Felix to use on himself. Felix was cleaning his body now, and as Steve washed his hair Felix started soaping him, his hands running sensually ever lower, lower... until finally he had one hand on Steve’s dick, which stood at rapt attention. Steve almost came as Felix teased him with a quick handjob, but Felix kept him on the edge and started to clean his ass.

“*Fuck,*” Steve murmured.

“Oh, did you want more?” Steve’s hand moved to finish himself off, as if in response, but Felix grabbed it and interlaced their fingers while shaking his head playfully. He pushed Steve against the wall then and rinsed his dick of the remaining soap. His kisses went lower, and lower, until his mouth was on Steve and Steve nearly bucked like a shaken horse as Felix worked.

“I-I-fuck yes, just-just like that, Felix, you’re so... fuck... and I-I’m already gonna—”

Felix was ready for it, and Steve saw spots for a few moments as the orgasm erased his mind. He wasn't even conscious of his own moaning until Felix came up to kiss him again and he realized his mouth was already open. He tasted himself on Felix's lips and there was something so intimate about it that he was instantly aroused again. Steve ran his hands through Felix's hair and pushed away from the wall.

"What did I do to deserve you?" Steve whispered, incredulous, as they swapped positions and Steve pressed Felix into that same spot. Felix's only response was a moan as Steve repeated the process. He knew how turned on Felix got when Steve kissed his neck, and he put that knowledge to work. He went lower and lower, until he was taking Felix in his mouth.

"You are my everything," Felix said quietly, as if voicing a private thought aloud. Steve felt his heart burn with love, and he put everything he could into what he was doing. Felix moaned under him, and Steve tried to make it louder. "S-Steve I'm... I'm... gonna cum!" Steve didn't stop; he was ready for it, too.

After, Felix stood limp against the wall, one hand still in Steve's hair, his eyes glazed. Steve came up to kiss him and he smiled. They finished cleaning one another, and after Steve finished rinsing the last of the conditioner from Felix's hair he massaged Steve's shoulders again; his hands felt like magic.

Steve turned around and brought Felix close, letting the water splash over both of them. He was still thankful every day he'd gotten Felix back, and he'd vowed never to fuck up like he had before. No one would ever take him away again.

"Everything okay, babe?" Felix asked softly into his ear when Steve didn't let go.

"Just savoring having you back with me," Felix kissed his forehead and humored him; they swayed softly under the water and when Felix finally turned away and shut it off Steve felt the absence keenly.

"I'm thankful for every day I get with you, Steve." He opened the door and handed Steve a towel as he started drying himself.

"Sometimes when I open my eyes I expect to be back there. Shackled in my cage or... or in that sack, or the stocks, or... or any of those other horrible... things... he had for me. I know he's dead... but his ghost hangs over me still." Felix looked at him then, his blond hair tousled from the towel. "But then I see you next to me, and I know everything is going to be okay. I know I'm safe."

Steve didn't know what to say. It was sweet, but it also made him worry; Felix said it so casually, as if he was simply used to that feeling. There was nothing Steve could do to make that better for him.

They dressed and Felix left to make breakfast. Steve combed his hair, and as he stared into the mirror he remembered that horrible photo he'd found under the sink. *Just a memory, now*, he thought. He left the bathroom to the smells of a full American breakfast: eggs, bacon, toast, even pancakes with blueberries just the way Felix knew he liked them. Felix smiled at him as Steve came into their kitchen.

"I found some real maple syrup in the International foods section at the market the other day," he said proudly. "Not that synthetic crap."

"What did I do to deserve you?" Steve repeated, practically salivating.

Felix laughed. "I'm not sure, but the sex helps." His face turned slightly more serious. "You saved my life Steve. In more ways than just the one." Steve blushed. "The least I can do is make you breakfast."

"You saved me, too."

"Well we're perfect for each other then, aren't we?" He handed Steve a plate with everything he made, preparing a smaller portion for himself. Steve glanced over his shoulder at the framed portrait of their wedding day, David, Dwight, Yui, Zarina, Robin, and Élodie proudly standing with them. All of their friends and family had been able to make it. Felix's smile in that picture still dazzled him. It had been the perfect day, and Steve knew there were many more to come.

David and Dwight met them outside a Mexican restaurant they'd found online and wanted to try. They'd been dating for almost a year now, though they'd kept it a secret from the group for months.

"Hey guys," Dwight said cheerily. The last time they'd seen one another, it had been to close a tear in the veil in the mountains of Nepal with Vigo. It was a welcome departure to see them in a relaxed setting. David wrapped Felix in a tight bear hug and then brought Steve in.

"How's married life treating you?" he asked playfully. Steve glanced at Felix, interlacing their fingers.

"It's nice to have on paper what I always knew," Felix said, looking directly into his eyes, and Steve felt his heart fill with love once more.

They were seated at a small outdoor table, quiet Spanish music playing through speakers in an awning above their head. Dwight wasted no time ordering a pitcher of margaritas for everyone. By the time they'd placed their orders, David and Dwight were practically bursting with excitement.

"So," Felix said. "You guys said you had a big announcement?"

David glanced at Dwight and the young American blushed.

"We're getting married," Dwight finally said, and showed them the tungsten wedding band Felix and Steve had pretended not to notice before.

"Congratulations, guys!" Steve thought they made a cute couple: whereas Dwight seemed timid, he was actually a brave and capable leader. David, meanwhile, was brash and loud, but at his heart was as tender as a kitten.

"I'll buy us another round for that," Felix said, smiling. "*Prost!*"

"Will you stand with us? Next May, in Manchester?" David asked, and for such a big man he looked almost nervous when he said it. As if there was anything Steve and Felix wouldn't do for them.

“Anything you need or want,” Steve said, “We’ll be there for you.”

“Absolutely,” Felix said. “We’ll throw you a grand stag do, too.”

“A what?” Dwight asked.

“A bachelor party, love,” David explained as Felix laughed.

By the time their food arrived, Steve was already starting to feel a warm dizziness. Felix reached over and tenderly rubbed his cheek, and Steve sighed contentedly. He turned red when he realized Felix was just wiping a dab of chipotle aioli from his cheek.

Felix laughed at his expression. “You’re already getting into your cups, aren’t you?”

“A little,” Steve admitted, smiling.

“Stop it with the British-isms,” Dwight said, laughing.

“Not deep enough,” David said, downing his glass in one go and pouring another. Felix had ordered another celebratory pitcher, this time a mezcal margarita with a smoky finish.

“Well, we can rectify that,” Steve said. “There’s a gay club a few streets over.”

“I could dance off these quesadillas,” Felix said, grinning.

David grinned his signature cocky smile; Steve saw Dwight eyeing him with love written all over his face, and it made him look in turn at Felix, who was laughing. Steve knew exactly how Dwight felt.

An hour and a half later, Felix was at the bar ordering everyone a round while Steve, Dwight, and David stood off to one side of the dance floor in a comfortable booth trading stories in the dim light. Pulsing EDM music, interspersed with some German technopop and indietronica, drowned out the dull roar of everyone else, though no one else mattered to them.

“And he looked at me and said, ‘I used to date your dad.’” Dwight was saying. “I said, ‘What do you mean? How do you know my dad?’

And he said, ‘Well, you look exactly like him.’” And then I realized I dated this dumbass in college, he was just 20 years older.” David started howling with laughter.

“He didn’t realize you were the same person?” Steve asked, incredulous.

“I’m glad he didn’t,” Dwight said, smiling, “He was not good in bed.”

Felix came back with two rum and cokes and kissed Steve lightly on the cheek. Steve could tell he was a little drunk too, because Felix was a happy-go-lucky kind of drunk who liked to tell everyone how much he loved them and how amazing they were.

“What’d I miss?” he said. “Wait, actually, hold that thought, I have two more waiting for me at the bar.”

Steve watched him walk back through the dancers, unabashedly enjoying the sight of his ass walking away. When he got to the bar, the bartender handed him two more drinks, and a tall man that looked like he could be bodybuilder came out of nowhere and started chatting with him. Even through the alcohol, or because of it, he felt an intense pang of jealousy. Dwight was still talking, but Steve had stopped listening.

Felix smiled at the man and said something, but Steve could tell it was strained. He was keenly aware of Felix’s body language, and right now it spelled out discomfort. Felix tried to walk away from him but the man grabbed his arm and started whispering in his ear. Steve was about to involve himself when Felix forcefully pulled himself away, spilling a little of the drinks in the process, and waded back through the crowd to the table.

“What was that about?” Steve asked. Dwight and David looked confused; they hadn’t seen it.

“Oh, nothing,” Felix said, but Steve could hear how the bubbly mirth in his voice had faded slightly. “Why aren’t we dancing?” He smiled playfully, and if it was forced Steve couldn’t tell. “I want to see you too lugs out there,” he added, pointing at David and Dwight. “You can fight, but can you dance?”

“The last time I danced I was so pissed I went arse over tit,” David said, but from his tone Steve could tell it wasn’t a ‘no’. Sure enough, Dwight pulled him out of the booth and David didn’t fight it as the four of them moved to the dance floor, drinks in hand.

Felix was a good dancer; Steve was okay. David was surprisingly light-footed despite what he’d said before. Dwight was terrible, but none of them cared. They were finally able to put everything they’d been through behind them and just enjoy themselves.

As Felix pulled a particularly impressive move that made Steve wonder if he’d had formal training, the man from the bar came out of nowhere and started dancing with them. David and Dwight were so busy making out that they didn’t even notice, but Steve saw the way Felix’s face changed to a mask camouflaging his discomfort as the man started grinding openly on him. Before Steve could say anything, one of his hands had wrapped itself around Felix’s waist, one finger dangerously close to the waistband of his jeans, while the other was... *fucking Hell*... groping his ass.

“What the fuck, man?” Steve said out loud, hoping his German-as-a-second-language adequately conveyed how pissed off he was. The man completely ignored him. Steve saw Felix still trying to dance, his face frozen. Steve thought he could see the ghost of a terrible memory playing in his eyes.

“This is the husband?” Steve heard him say. He didn’t understand what the man said next, but he inferred it was something obscene.

Felix tried to pull himself away but the man held him fast. He was clearly drunk. “Can you fuck off?” Felix said. “I told you I was married.” He squirmed, but the man was huge.

“This cute little thing can join us, if he wants.” The hand on Felix’s waist reached out for Steve as if beckoning a dog. “But I don’t think he can destroy your hole like I can.” This time, Steve understood him perfectly.

“I said, ‘fuck off!’” Felix repeated, more forcefully, switching to English. The man still didn’t move his hands. Some of the dancers around them had noticed and were giving them a wider berth now.

“Hey, fuck you, man!” Steve started, ready to fight this man who was at least half again his size, but before he could do anything David noticed what was happening and physically forced the man off of Felix.

“Are you fucking daft?” David wasn’t as big as the other man, but he had the best chance against him. “The man said to piss off. So piss off.”

The man smirked and raised his hands as if to profess innocence. Felix took the opportunity to move away from him. “Who’re you, the guard dog?” Steve saw David tense, poised to strike. Felix put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. “Fine then. Your loss, but if you change your mind I’ll be over there, blondie.” The man finally walked away, a stupid, drunk little smirk on his face as he looked at Felix.

“What a dick,” Dwight said.

“It’s fine,” Felix said, but in a tone that suggested to Steve’s trained ear it was not. “I’m not letting that asshole sour our night out.”

“What if you came back to our place?” Steve said, wanting suddenly to be away from the crowd, some of whom had started openly staring after the altercation. Moreover, he wanted to get Felix somewhere where that man couldn’t bother them again. Steve saw him still staring at Felix from the corner of his eye. “Keep the party going a little longer?”

David and Dwight agreed; they’d noticed the people staring now too. Steve wrapped a protective arm around Felix and the four of them left together. Their drunken, happy buzz returned as they talked on the way back to Felix and Steve’s flat. Steve could see how Felix’s mood lifted as soon as they were back in the chilly night air.

When they got there, Felix put a Spotify playlist on and moved the coffee table so they could keep dancing like fools. They were buzzed enough that this seemed like a fun idea. Steve made margaritas that, Felix assured him, were just as good as the ones at the restaurant. Steve didn’t believe him, but none of them were sober enough to care much.

After a while, David collapsed, laughing, on the couch. “This is just as good as the club, I reckon,” Dwight pulled a particularly bad move as Gabriela Richardson’s Hundred Miles played in the background; David laughed even harder, pulling him down next to him. “You need more to drink, love. It might make you a better dancer.” Dwight took his glasses off for a moment and ran his hand through his hair.

“I could use another,” he said, a goofy smile crossing his face. “Speaking of that. Have you ever thought about it?” he said suddenly, turning to Felix, who was swaying slowly with Steve’s head on his chest as the track changed to something a little slower.

“Thought about what?”

“Another person. A third... maybe a fourth. Just for a night... maybe two. I mean, fuck convention.”

Steve raised his head slowly from the soft warmth of Felix’s chest. “A third... in our bed you mean?” he asked.

Dwight nodded. “David and I have talked about it,” he said, a little sloppily.

“Love,” David broke in. “Shut it. They don’t want to hear about that.”

Felix laughed. “It’s okay. We haven’t talked about that, and that guy at the bar would be my last choice if that’s what brought this up.” He took a sip from the glass he held in the arm wrapped around Steve, then shared it with him.

“No, that guy was an asshole. But what about us?” Dwight said, pointing clumsily at David and himself. Steve was dumbfounded.

“Love, I said, *shut up*.” David had turned a dark red.

“Would you, though?” Dwight pressed.

“Sorry about him,” David said, his accent growing a little thicker as his nervousness showed through. “He’s just a little drunk.”

“But the other night you said—” Dwight started, and David put his hand on his lips to stop him from talking.

Steve looked at the two of them and maybe it was the alcohol, but he found himself tempted to say yes. They'd been through so much together... why not this, too? It wouldn't change anything between him and Felix, or between David and Dwight. He glanced at Felix, a little question written on his face. He knew Felix would be able to read his expression, and he saw the same temptation written in his eyes, too. He was glad how well they understood one another in that moment.

When he read Felix's response in his eyes, Steve let go of his husband and walked to the couch. He pulled Dwight up and the other man blushed, but then they were kissing, and it didn't feel like Felix, but it felt *good*. He felt Felix watching him, and wondered what he was thinking. Was this okay? Then Dwight was pulling him in, and Steve felt electricity flow through his skin at his touch.

Next to them, David stood up and grabbed Felix's hand. From the corner of his eye, Steve saw there was a hunger there he hadn't noticed before, maybe hadn't wanted to notice. He pushed Felix down onto the couch, pressing him into the fabric softly, and kissed him deeply, passionately. Steve couldn't deny the note of jealousy that sprang up in his chest, but it was also one of the hottest things he'd ever seen. If it had been someone else, maybe anyone else, he would have wanted it to stop. But David and Dwight were different.

Dwight had his hand on Steve's lower back then, and all he could focus on was the gentle press of their lips and the sweet-and-sour taste of the margarita on his tongue. Dwight slowly led them over to the couch next to where Felix and David were still locked together. David pulled away for a moment, sitting on Felix's lap, and Felix ran his hands up his hard torso. David smiled a cocky grin, then.

"Is this okay?" he asked, one hand reaching tenderly to Felix's cheek.

"More than okay," Felix said. Felix looked at Steve then, and Steve broke away for a moment and nodded, smiling. David pulled off his shirt in one fluid motion, revealing the hard muscles underneath. Dwight pulled away from Steve then and stood up to massage David's shoulder's gently, Felix still beneath them both.

David moaned at Dwight's touch and reached out to Steve, lacing

their fingers together. Steve let himself be pulled in and David kissed him deeply. Steve could taste Felix on his lips, and it was so intensely erotic he felt himself already growing hard.

David turned his head to kiss Dwight from behind and Steve reached down to bring his lips to his husbands', his hand still locked with David's. This was not something they'd ever even considered, nor even something Steve had privately fantasized about, but he was already craving release. David stood up then, pulling Felix with him and then Steve, too.

Dwight took his sweater off, and Steve stopped to unbutton his shirt for him. From the corner of his eye, he saw David doing the same to Felix, and saw his husband's fingers straying to hungrily unfasten David's belt. Dwight was pulling off Steve's sweater then, his hands slowly running along the lean curves of Steve's body. Steve moaned involuntarily at his touch, and then Dwight was taking his pants off, too.

Before Steve knew what was happening, all four of them were in the bedroom in only their briefs. David alone among them wore white boxers with a pattern of little red hearts that looked adorably out of place on his heavily muscled thighs.

"I don't actually know how this works," Felix said nervously, and Steve saw a little blush cross his face.

David smiled at him. "It works however you want it to work," he said, and took Felix in for another kiss. Steve's mouth practically fell open when David bodily picked Felix up and pressed him against the wall. Felix moaned as David's mouth moved to his neck; Felix's hands clutched the naked skin of David's back. Did he somehow know how much Felix liked that? It was the hottest thing Steve had ever seen; Felix's legs were wrapped around David's waist, his head craned back and his eyes closed as David's mouth took him in greedily.

Dwight walked up to Steve then and gently pushed him onto the bed. Steve propped himself up on his elbows as Dwight kissed the skin of his waist just above his thighs, slowly moving his fingers up Steve's lean thighs. He heard Felix moan again nearby, and David was whispering something in his ear. But then Dwight was pulling Steve's

briefs down, and Steve bit his lip to stop himself from gasping as he realized he was rock hard. Dwight took his time; it was such a foreign thing to be with someone other than Felix.

Felix could hardly think. He'd never even imagined something like this, but now David had him completely under his power; it wasn't controlling, it was liberating. Felix's hands dug into David's back as he continued to kiss his neck. He felt utterly safe, but at the same time David was having his way with his body and it was intensely erotic. One hand shot to David's hair as David moved for a moment to whisper in his ear.

"I've always wanted to do this," he said quietly, and Felix suddenly realized a part of him had always wanted that, too. "Do you even know how beautiful you are?"

"You already have me against the wall," Felix said, a soft laugh forming on his lips.

"I'm not flattering you," David said, his mouth moving to his neck again, kissing it softly. God, Felix loved that. "I'm telling you what everyone sees when they look at you. What I see when I look at you."

"Says the man who was literally in a beach photoshoot," Felix said, laughing.

"That was a one-off," David pulled back for a moment, still totally in control of Felix's body. They stared into one another's eyes for a moment before David kissed him again, deeply, and Felix felt a powerful warmth spread through his chest. He could hear Steve moaning behind David as Dwight's mouth took him in, and he realized he wasn't jealous anymore. They were all in this, together, whatever this was. Felix didn't want to be polyamorous, but at least for tonight, with these two, it felt right. "I think we need to get these off," David said suddenly, nodding at Felix's briefs, and he let Felix down for a moment. He pulled them off slowly, sensually, and his dick sprang free between them, its hard length pressing against the rigid muscles of David's chest. Before Felix could say anything, David had picked him up once more.

David kissed him again, and Felix's fingers fumbled at his boxers, trying to pull them down, but from his position against the wall he didn't have the leverage. Nonetheless, he felt the hard bulge through them.

"You've got me at a bit of a disadvantage here," Felix said in between kisses. David laughed. Without so much as repositioning Felix, he slipped out of the boxers and Felix's hands shot almost of their own accord to David's tight ass. He felt David's dick throbbing against his own now.

"Fuck," David said simply, and pulled Felix away from the wall without warning. Felix felt like a ragdoll in David's strong grasp; somehow, their lips hardly parted. Felix let himself be carried, perfectly content in David's arms, and then suddenly he was on his back on the bed next to Steve, who was so lost in his own ecstasy it seemed he hardly noticed.

David pulled Dwight up for a moment and they kissed as Steve whimpered softly. Felix took the opportunity to take Steve's hand and laced their fingers together. Steve seemed to gain his wits again then, because he sat up and hungrily pulled Dwight's briefs off, too, as he and David still kissed. Both men smiled at him as he pulled Dwight down to swap places. Dwight moaned slightly and Felix took the chance to kiss him for the first time, tasting both of the other men on his tongue.

Felix was distracted suddenly by David pulling him closer to the edge of the bed without warning, and they were kissing again.

"Is this okay?" he asked again as he put on the condom, and Felix simply nodded, biting his lip. That seemed to excite David even more, and before he knew it a finger was inside, then two, and suddenly he was loose enough for David to enter him. Felix gasped at the pain, and then the intense pleasure, as David was suddenly inside him fully. David's hands grasped his thighs powerfully, intimately, and he leaned forward to kiss him again before he started to thrust. If Dwight was jealous his fiancé was fucking someone else right next to him, he didn't show it. Steve was taking Dwight in his mouth, and the sounds of passion became a chorus.

Felix moaned, a mix of pain and pleasure fueling him to ecstasy. David gasped in tune with him, and Felix knew it wouldn't be long before he came without any help as David pressed himself against his prostate in just the right way. David interlaced their fingers and kissed him again as he finally came inside Felix, and the warmth and fullness of it set Felix over the edge, too. David wiped sweat from his brow and took a moment to clean them off with a towel before collapsing next to Felix. Dwight was still writhing in ecstasy beside them.

David put an arm over Felix's chest and pulled him closer, a wonderfully intimate feeling. Dwight, spent, snuggled up next to Felix on his other side and Steve next to him. The four of them somehow fit comfortably together on the bed.

"Wow," Dwight said simply into Felix's right pectoral. "Can we go again?"

Felix looked at him and when he opened his mouth to respond Dwight kissed him, his hand straying to Felix's dick. Felix found himself growing hard all over again within seconds, and then he felt David's hands exploring him, too. The way they touched Felix made him feel as though he were being worshipped, and then Steve was there as well. The feeling of three men touching him, holding him, kissing him, made Felix groan with pleasure.

Steve pulled Felix down toward him, spreading his legs again as Dwight and David kissed his body. Felix couldn't really process everything that was happening as Steve started to fuck him, a feeling he knew well, but now with David and Dwight on top of him at the same time. David positioned himself so his dick hovered over Felix's mouth, and his mouth in turn rested above Felix's; without even thinking about it, both of them set to work. Dwight stood up and wrapped his arms around Steve as he moved, kissing him from behind. Felix was keenly aware that Steve's navel was grazing the top of David's head with every thrust.

Felix couldn't see clearly, but he knew from the way Steve started moaning and the added pressure and vibration in his ass that Dwight had started taking Steve from behind even as he fucked Felix. Felix couldn't focus, the intense pleasure flooding him in a haze of ecstasy.

When Felix awoke, he found himself naked in a tangle of bodies. David's head rested on his left pectoral, his arm draped casually across Felix's chest; his hard abs pressed warmly into Felix's side. Dwight was curled up behind him, as if playing the big spoon, though he was much smaller than David. Steve's head rested next to Felix on the pillow, his body almost a mirror image of David's position.

David and Dwight were snoring softly, but Felix almost jumped when he realized Steve's eyes were open and staring at him questioningly.

"Morning, babe," Felix said casually, and Steve smiled.

"Was that okay?" Steve asked, echoing David's question from last night.

"I know in the movies they always decide it was a mistake the day after," Felix said, one of his fingers brushing Steve's hair back. "But I don't feel that way."

"Neither do I," Steve said. "You know you are still my everything, don't you?"

"As surely as you should know you are mine," Felix said, and kissed Steve deeply. David stirred softly, and Dwight, as if they were inexorably linked, stirred alongside him. "That was fun though," he added into Steve's lips, his eyes still closed.

"It was," Steve smiled, pulling back slightly. "I'm gonna go shower and after that I think it's my turn to make breakfast. Something greasy for the hangover, yeah? These guys might need it." He gestured to David and Dwight.

"Thanks, babe."

"I love American breakfast," David murmured into Felix's chest. He groaned as he sat up, one hand going to massage his head. "Last night was amazing." The hand draped across Felix's chest reached up to caress his cheek softly. Felix trembled slightly at the touch. "Maybe we can go again while we're still here?" Felix felt his massive morning wood pressed against his thigh.

“What do you say, love?” Steve asked Felix, kissing his neck softly.

Felix smiled, knowing his husband already knew his answer. He knew today would be another one of those perfect days.